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LETTERS
ON
LITERATURE,
TASTE,
AND
COMPOSITION,

ADDRESSED TO HIS SON,

BY GEORGE GREGORY, D.D.

LATE VICAR OF WEST-HAM, DOMESTIC CHAPLAIN TO
THE BISHOP OF LLANDAFF, &c. &c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR RICHARD PHILLIPS,
BRIDGE-STREET, BLACKFRIARS.

1808.

T. Gillet, Crown-court.



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LETTERS

ON

LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION.

LETTER XX.

Narration.—Description.

MY DEAR JOHN,

THOUGH oratory seems to require more genius, for if the orator would touch the heart, he must call fancy to his aid, yet it is an extraordinary fact, that taking oratory in an extensive view, as including all addresses to the passions, whether in the shape of letters, pamphlets, or speeches, almost every period of literature has produced more good orators than good narrators.

The number of good historians in any language is very limited. There are but few books of travels which are so interesting that we would

wish to read them a second time ; and even the fictitious narratives which issue daily in swarms from the press, are seldom well written : though for reasons, which I shall afterwards assign, this is by far the easiest form of narrative composition.

Let any man of letters try to compose an argumentative, or even an oratorical discourse, and let him afterwards attempt a narrative, and he will soon find the latter by far the more difficult task. It is difficult to form and pursue a lucid order and arrangement ; it is difficult, out of the number of circumstances which will crowd upon him, to select those only which are important and striking ; to know where to be brief and where to be minute ; to distinguish the lights and the shades ; to see on what he ought to enlarge, and what he should cursorily pass over. It is exceedingly difficult to avoid a flat and monotonous tone ; to give spirit, animation, and interest to a mere recital of facts ; and that, when the writer composes not under the influence of passion, or the ardour of controversy, which in narrative is seldom the case.

I know not whether I shall express myself clearly or not ; but I feel that, in didactic or

argumentative discourses, the words arrange themselves more easily in sentences, more in the manner of colloquial discussion. In narrative the writer scarcely knows where to stop, or how to round a sentence, which may perhaps be in part the reason for the long periods of Clarendon, and some other historians. It is difficult too to draw the picture; for narrative is a picture in words, so that it shall be full, clear, and impressive, and keep awake the reader's attention through the whole.

The difficulties which I have now enumerated will in some measure anticipate the rules for narrative composition; if indeed any rules can be laid down for governing the fancy, and directing the taste. Perspicuity, it will be easily seen, is the first excellence of narrative. The impression must be clear and vivid. Whether the subject will admit of ornament or not is a remote consideration compared with this indispensable quality. On this account, the writer of even an extended history should take care to have a clear and comprehensive view of the subject in his mind, at least to a given period. He should see it as a picture or a drama before his eyes, previous to his beginning to compose. If

he has this view of the subject before him, he will easily, if he has judgment and taste, distinguish the parts or circumstances which should be treated in detail, from those which should be transiently glanced at, or perhaps wholly omitted.

To have a just and comprehensive view of his subject previously formed, (at least to a certain extent as to the order of time) will enable an author to write with vivacity, and to interest his readers, for he will describe within a shorter compass, and in a manner less dull and tedious than the person who transcribes every circumstance from a note book; and the fancy will have a more unbounded range, and be able to throw in more of ornament and eloquence.

As in the style of narrative perspicuity is the first object, an author should be careful that every sentence may present a distinct image, for nothing confuses more than when several circumstances are blended or complicated one with another. Yet for the sake of harmony, and to avoid a monotonous tone, which is a very common vice of narration, the sentences must not be too short. I have been told that Mr. Gibbon was in the habit of composing

while he walked about his room ; and that he never committed a sentence to paper till it was perfectly formed in his mind. The purest, best, and most expressive terms, should be chosen for narrative. Many of the vulgarisms which are allowed in the oratorical effusions of Mr. Burke, would not be endured in narrative, nor would he have introduced them. In the style of oratory we expect the flights and eccentricities of fancy ; we can forgive something that may disgust where there is much to please ; but in that of narrative we expect an even flow, not turbid or impure.

The degree of ornament or figure to be employed must depend in a great measure on the subject ; but in general it is safer to attempt too little in the way of ornament than too much. Nothing tends more to confuse a narrative than a style too florid ; though figurative language, sparingly, and judiciously introduced, occasionally gives animation. The comparison is a figure too flat and formal to suit with narrative, and almost the only figure which may be freely employed is the metaphor. But even metaphors, when introduced, should be easy and natural, for recondite or remote allusions

perplex the mind, and withdraw the attention from the subject. They must not be common-place neither, for nothing renders a style so frigid as common-place ornaments. But after all, on this as on every practical subject of literature, I must have recourse to a maxim which I recommended very early in our correspondence. The attentive and studious perusal of the best writers in this, as well as in every other department, will effect infinitely more than any abstract rules or observations whatever. Read carefully the most approved narrators; mark their manner of bringing events and circumstances before your view; observe their mode of connecting them; the compass and turn of their periods. You will see that there is nothing abrupt; nothing either defectively terminated, or violently or harshly introduced; or where there is a deviation from the thread or course of the story, the reader's mind is prepared by a short introduction or apology, so that the smoothness and simplicity of the narrative shall not be materially interrupted. As you will have to write in English, I would advise you to study the best models in your own language, for none has better writers

of narrative. It will also be an improving exercise, if, after having read a long passage, and made yourself master of the facts, you close the book and try to narrate them yourself, when the comparison will shew you your own defects, and enable you to avoid them on a future occasion. For the grave kind of narration examine the style of Robertson, Hume, Gibbon, Goldsmith,* and Dr. Hawkesworth's Voyages; for the lighter and more familiar kinds, the short narratives in the Spectator, especially those of Mr. Addison; some of a similar nature in the Rambler of Dr. Johnson; and the Adventurer of Dr. Hawkesworth, will afford you unexceptionable specimens.

Description makes a part of every narrative, and is so nearly allied to this kind of composition, that it may be safely treated under the same head. Though I do not recommend so mechanical a practice as the use of topics, or *communes loci*, yet every person who has to describe should have always something of a ge-

* The History of England, in a series of Letters from a Nobleman to his Son, is an admirable specimen of historical language, sufficiently familiar, without any loss of dignity.

neral plan in his mind, to which he can recur, and which he may apply to particular cases, so that no material circumstance shall be omitted. Thus, in describing a place, the author must advert to the climate, the situation, the soil, the harbour, if a sea-port, the buildings, &c. In describing a battle, he will not forget the characters of the respective commanders, the nature of the troops, the proportions of cavalry and infantry, the characters of the soldiers as to country, discipline, valour and conduct, the position, order, and disposition of the two armies. If he does this in the way of contrast, it will add greatly to the liveliness of the description. The account of the onset, and the issue of the engagement, must depend upon the particular facts and incidents.

Again, in the delineation of any human character, an historian will give some account of the personal qualities of the individual he describes, as to stature, general appearance, and particularly as to the character of his countenance. He will notice his lineage and his education; the passions for which he has been most remarkable, the studies in which he has been most eminent, and thus proceed to the

characteristic and marking features of his mind. Sallust perhaps exceeds every author, antient or modern, in the delineation of character. His portrait of Catiline is alive in every part; we do not look upon a picture, we see, and converse with the man.

Lastly, if you have to describe any natural phenomenon, it will be right to acquaint yourself philosophically with its causes and its effects, and this will operate against your forgetting any material circumstance in the description. There is an excellent description of the presages of a thunder storm in Beccaria, which I have copied in the *Economy of Nature*. The moving pillars of sand in the desert, as described by Mr. Bruce, in his *Travels*, must interest any reader; and the following description of a phenomenon, which is unfortunately not uncommon, will serve as a fair example: it is that of an earthquake by the Abbe Raynal.

“ This phenomenon, which is ever irregular in its sudden returns, is however announced by very perceptible omens. When the shock is considerable, it is preceded by a murmur in the air, the noise of which is like that of a

heavy rain falling from a cloud that suddenly bursts and discharges its waters. This noise seems to be the effect of a vibration of the air, which is agitated in several different directions.. The birds are then observed to dart in their flight ; neither their tails nor their wings serve them any longer as oars and helms to swim in the fluid of the skies ; they dash themselves against the walls, the trees, and the rocks, whether it be that this vertigo of nature dazzles and confuses them, or that the vapours of the earth take away their strength and power to command their movements.

“ To this tumult in the air is added the rumbling of the earth, whose cavities and deep recesses re-echo to each other's noises. The dogs answer these previous tokens of a general disorder of nature, by howling in an extraordinary manner. The animals stop, and, by a natural instinct, hold out their legs that they may not fall. Upon these indications the inhabitants instantly run out of their houses, with terror impressed upon their countenances, and fly to search in the inclosures of public places, or in the fields, an asylum from the fall of the roofs. The cries of children, the lamentations

of women, the sudden darkness of an unexpected night ; every thing combines to aggravate the too real evils of a dire calamity, which subverts every thing by the excruciating tortures of the imagination, which is distressed and confounded, and loses, in the contemplation of this disorder, the thought and courage to remedy it."

The imagination will, however, be most powerfully assisted by the perusal of fine descriptions in the best authors, such as the return of Agrippina in Tacitus ; that of the defeat of the Romans by the Samnites ; and the return of the consuls, in the 9th book of Livy ; that of the temple of Daphne, in the 23d chapter of Gibbon ; and of the Earthquake, in the beginning of the 26th chapter of the same author, which is more ornamented, but less general, than that which I have inserted above.

History, from the importance of the subject, the rise, fate, and fall of nations, and from its utility in affording the best instruction in politics, and the most interesting views of human nature, holds the first rank among narrative compositions. Voyages and travels may be considered as the next in consequence ; and to

those fictitious narratives, composed chiefly for entertainment, under the names of Romances and Novels, may be assigned the lowest place. It must, however, be the object of my next letters to treat of these distinctly, as I should greatly exceed my limits, or do injustice to the subject, should I endeavour to compress them into this.

LETTER XXI.

History—Antient Historians—Scripture History—Herodotus—Thucydides—Xenophon—Polybius—Sallust—Livy—Tacitus—Comnena—De Thou—Davila—Modern History—Buchanan—Clarendon—Rapin—Lytleton—Hume—Robertson—Gibbon.

MY DEAR JOHN,

HISTORY may be classed under two general divisions, the history of nations and of individuals; the latter has been termed biography. The history of nations, or public history, will again admit of certain subdivisions, viz. history, properly so called, and chronicles, annals and memoirs.

The first histories of all nations, I have no doubt, were originally in verse; and those early histories which are now extant, even in prose, bear in some measure the characters of poetry. The scripture histories, though brief, are almost poetical. Whether they were originally

composed in metre or not, our ignorance of the Hebrew measures renders us incompetent to decide. The older histories of other nations have all somewhat of a dramatic complexion, and the fictitious speeches which are ascribed to their principal character, savour more of the epic than of what I conceive should be the character of true history.

If, however, such is the origin of history, as I conceive it was, this alliance with poetry has given to it a dignity, an elevation, a life and spirit above that of a mere chronicle. Instead of a bare record of facts and dates, it is now an artificial composition; a splendid emanation of genius, when well executed, as much as an oration or an epic poem, and scarcely perhaps a less laborious effort.

You will think I shall never have done with divisions and classifications; for I must remark that public history properly so called may again be divided under two heads; 1st. Those general histories which record the transactions of a nation from its rise to its fall; and 2dly. Those histories which treat of a particular period or a particular event. Of the first class are those of Herodotus (which may indeed be

regarded as a history of the world to his own time), Livy, Justin (which is an abridgment of Trogus Pompeius, now lost). Velleius Paterculus, Eutropius, perhaps Tacitus; and in modern times, Rapin's, Hume's, and the larger histories of our own country, and that of Mr. Gibbon. In the second class we may range 'Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, the two Histories of Sallust, Guiccardini, Davila, Clarendon's History of the Civil Wars in England, the various histories of the Reformation, Dr. Robertson's History of Charles V., and of Scotland at a particular period, Mr. Roscoe's Lorenzo de Medicis, and Leo X., and many others.

It will be obvious, and it will be confirmed by the perusal, that the writer who records a particular event or a particular period, has the easier, and the pleasanter task. He may adopt a perfect unity of design, may arrange his subject to the best advantage, may dramatize it, if I may use the expression. He will have the same set of actors and characters; and can obtain a much clearer view of his subject and all its parts and circumstances, than he who has to drudge through the records of ages, and pur-

sue, often with a faint and glimmering light, the progress of a nation from barbarism to refinement and greatness, and afterwards through all the mazes of luxury and corruption to its enslavement or dissolution.

A French critic terms Mr. Gibbon's an "endless history." Perhaps indeed, consistently with his title, he might have stopped when the seat of empire was transferred from Rome ; perhaps more properly at the division of the empire ; still more properly when it was overrun by the barbarians. But who could wish so enchanting a writer to stop at all ? His history is indeed not that of a particular dynasty, scarcely that of a particular nation, but of many. But whether we regard it as one or several histories, our only regret is, that instead of having written so much he did not write more, or that he should have left a subject untouched by the magic of his pen.

In what may be termed general history, however, every writer will find it commodious to distribute it into such portions or periods as may enable him to adopt a unity of design for each portion, to exhibit every great event clear and distinct, and to finish one portion or pe-

riod before he begins upon another. As the materials of history must be drawn from many sources, it must be compiled by the aid of notes or references collected with a view to the arrangement the historian means to pursue, generally I conceive in the order of time. It will however facilitate the task, if he takes one author for his basis, and makes his notes refer to others, either on the margin, or on a separate slip of paper. This I have indeed heard was the practice of Mr Gibbon. At all events, however, the historian before he begins must have a complete view of his subject in his mind, and compose in a great measure from his preconceived ideas, if he wishes to avoid the character of a mere copyist or transcriber.

It is almost common-place to say, that the great requisites of history are truth, impartiality, and perspicuity. The style of history should be grave, dignified, temperate and sedate. Purity is more essential than ornament, for reasons which I have already assigned; yet the style should not be monotonous, but animated, whenever the occasion is of sufficient importance.

Historical writing as such, without reference

to the poetical histories is very antient, for we may regard the Pentateuch of Moses as the first history. From well authenticated tradition, and from the best of evidence, we are fully authorised to ascribe it to the venerable personage, whose name it bears; but the latter parts were undoubtedly added by Joshua, or some person under his direction. It includes in a small compass a vast scope and a long period, being a history of man from the creation to the death of the author, and including the whole code of laws, civil and religious, which was given to the people of Israel. If no religious character was attached to it; if we ceased to venerate it as the origin and source of that faith which we profess, it would be a most curious relic of antiquity, and must be allowed to contain a record of the first ages, bearing more internal marks of authenticity than any antient history extant. The style is simple and sententious. It is often interspersed with fragments of poetry, perhaps parts of the original memorial lines from which the narrative was in part at least compiled. Yet it cannot class under the character of a chronicle or annals, but is a regular, though brief, history of many

ages and many important transactions. Some parts, and particularly the history of Joseph, are incomparably beautiful, and there is no part deficient in spirit. Yet from the singular, and almost metrical style in which it is composed, it cannot be a model for imitation, and is scarcely an object of criticism in this age of literature.

The other parts of sacred history, particularly the Books of Samuel, of Kings, and Chronicles, belong rather to the class of annals, than of general history. One circumstance I must remark of them all, that brief as they are, they are remarkable for exhibiting always a striking picture to the mind of the reader. They lose not the matter in general, but the principal actors and characters are before our eyes. This is strongly exemplified in the transactions of Samuel with Eli, and afterwards with Saul. In the life of David, and particularly in the affecting interview with Nathan the prophet; in the history of Jeroboam, and of the prophet who declaims against the altars; the seizure of the vineyard of Naboth, and the death of Jezebel. Who can now write history that makes

so forcible an impression, or that is so easily and perfectly remembered ?

The Greeks and Romans excelled in historical writing as much as in any department of literature. The reason is obvious—Oratory is nearly allied to history, and no people ever cultivated oratory with more indefatigable attention. The democratical governments of these nations afforded such a scope for the display of eloquence, that it was almost the only road to celebrity and promotion. The general was obliged to study this fascinating art both to obtain advancement and to defend himself if assailed by faction. The statesman had no other means of rising in the estimation of his countrymen. History, therefore, when committed to writing by generals and statesmen thus accomplished, must necessarily be elegant and rhetorical. Such were the works of Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Sallust, and perhaps Herodotus and Livy. With respect to the attaining of information also, as they had not the advantages of modern writers, where every public transaction is committed to the press, their labour and exertions are almost in-

credible. Independant of his own observation, Thucidydes, we are assured, expended large sums of money to obtain correct information. Polybius travelled over most of the countries which were the scenes of the transactions he records, and particularly visited the Alps, that he might form a correct opinion of the celebrated march of Hannibal. Indeed we have the authority of Plautus to satisfy us that in the opinion of the antients no man was capable of writing history who had not travelled. I allude to a speech of Messenio to Menechmus, advising him to return home—

“ Quin.nos hinc domum redimus, nisi historiam scripturi sumus.”

Of the antient Greek historians I need scarcely tell you that the most celebrated are Herodotus, Thucidydes, and Xenophon. I cannot better introduce the first of these to your notice than in the beautiful language of Mr. Hayley, whose Essay on History deserves to be read by every person of taste, not only for some excellent poetry which it contains, though it is rather unequal, but for sound criticism, and much well-directed reading, particularly in the notes.

“ The dome expands! Behold th’ historic sire !
“ Ionic roses mark his soft attire ;
“ Bold in his air, but graceful in his mien
“ As the fair figure of his favoured queen,*
“ When her proud galley sham’d the Persian van,
“ And grateful Xerxes own’d her more than man.
“ Soft as the stream, whose dimpling waters play,
“ And wind in lucid lapse their pleasing way,
“ His rich Homeric elocution flows,
“ For all the muses modulate his prose.”

The title of “ father of history” was assigned him by no less an authority than Cicero, not, we may reasonably suppose, as the first person who ever engaged in that line of writing, for several had preceded him ; but as an expression of excellence, such as he assumed himself in the title of “ Pater Patriæ,” for having extinguished the conspiracy of Catiline.

The history of Herodotus is in truth a wonderful production. It may properly be classed among general histories, for it comprehends a vast extent of time, and includes the history of all the nations of the civilized world at that period. He was evidently a great traveller,

* Artemisia of Halicarnassus. See Herod, lib. viii.

and had visited most of the countries whose history he details. He was not less a geographer than an historian ; but his great excellence lies in detailing the manners and customs of the different nations. As to the nonsense which has been written by those who have followed contemporary authors who were envious of his fame, respecting his credulity, I pay but little attention to it. It was necessary that a history such as that of Herodotus, should include some fables, but no writer can be more guarded than he is. To give an idea of the genius and character of the particular people whom he delineates, it was necessary to mention many facts which he suspected, and some that he knew to be false. He declares, that “ though he considers it as his duty to deliver what he has heard as to any point treated of in his history, yet he is far from giving as true and accurate all that he relates. In most cases, where any thing of a doubtful nature occurs, he generally adds, “ this is as I have heard the fact related,” or he produces his authority. Mr. Hume, whose classical erudition I have on a former occasion presumed to question, asserts that the “ first page of Thucydides is the com-

mencement of real history ;” but if we were without the nine books of Herodotus, we should find ourselves much at a loss respecting the events of the Persian war, and many of the early transactions of the Greeks ; and I cannot persuade myself to believe that he would have acquired the vast reputation he obtained among his contemporaries, many of whom must have been witnesses of all the later facts which he details, had he not deserved the character of a faithful and correct historian. All agree that he is a most entertaining and interesting writer ; and I think his style a model of sweetness and simplicity. There is a translation in our language by Mr. Beloe, which possesses all the simplicity of the original.

Thucydides is among those who have confined their history to a particular period and event. It comprehends the space, as I remember of about twenty-seven years, and treats of the Peloponesian war, which happened in his own time, and of many of the facts he was a spectator. His task was of course much easier than that of Herodotus, and he has executed it in a masterly manner. He traces facts and their causes with the keen eye of a consummate po-

litician, and embellishes them with the pen of an expert rhetorician. There are many masterly touches of oratory in the fictitious speeches which he puts in the mouths of his principal characters; the funeral oration of Pericles in the second book I have always particularly admired: perhaps Thucydides is not unfairly characterized by Mr. Hayley—

- “ His the rich prize that caught his early gaze,*
- “ Th’ eternal pleasure of increasing praise,
- “ Pure from the stain of favour or of hate,
- “ His nervous line unfolds the deep debate,
- “ Explores the seeds of war; with matchless force
- “ Draws discord springing from ambition’s source,
- “ With all her demagogues who murder peace,
- “ In the fierce struggles of contentious Greece.”

General Andreossi, in a memoir lately published, containing observations on the principal historians, chiefly with a view to the accuracy of their military descriptions, says of Thucydides, that “ his work is a masterpiece of military talent, unfolding the internal policy of

* When a boy he wept for emulation at hearing one of the books of Herodotus recited with applause at the Olympic games.

the Greeks, and the operations of a long and stubborn contest."

It is not easy to determine in which class to place the elegant and accomplished Xenophon. If we regard his continuation of Thucidydes, he will class with general historians; since his object was evidently to make it a general history, of Greece at least, for a considerable period. "The Anabasis, or retreat of the ten thousand," would by many be placed among the commentaries, memoirs, chronicles and annals; and his *Cyropædia* must, I think, be regarded as a fictitious narrative. The *Anabasis* is confessedly his most finished work. It may be considered as a history limited to a short period; but in whatever light it is regarded, nothing can be more interesting, pleasant, and entertaining. It afforded, undoubtedly, the model for Cæsar's *Commentaries*, but is a more interesting and finer composition. Xenophon never rises to the sublime, but is always chaste, correct, elegant, and engaging. He enchains the mind of his reader, and renders him impatient to hear what event is next to occur. Simplicity is a remarkable characteristic of this work; even the order of the words

is little inverted, and this, with the pure Attic dictions, renders it an easy book for those who have made little progress in the Greek language. On looking into Mr. Hayley I am surprised to find how much my opinion has been anticipated by this judicious writer—

“ O rich in all the blended gifts that grace
 “ Minerva’s darling sons of Attic race!
 “ Thy simple diction, free from glaring art,
 “ With sweet allurements steals upon the heart;
 “ Pure as the rill that nature’s hand refines,
 “ A cloudless mirror of thy soul it shines.
 “ Two passions there by soft contention please,
 “ The love of martial fame, and learned ease,
 “ Those friendly colours exquisitely join’d
 “ To form th’ enchanting picture of thy mind;
 “ Thine was the praise bright models to afford
 “ To Cæsar’s rival pen and rival sword,” &c.

Xenophon was much studied by the Roman warriors, as affording the best instructions in the military art, and particularly by Lucullus. General Andreossi says, “ Every military man should study Xenophon, particularly in his famous retreat of the ten thousand, when he will find it difficult to decide whether the glory of the retreat, or the merit of the narrator are most deserving of unqualified admiration.”

I am uncertain whether Polybius ought to be accounted a Greek or a Roman historian. His language is the former, but his subject is Roman ; and his long residence at Rome, and his intimacy with Scipio and Lælius, almost naturalized him to that part of the world. Had his intention been completed, he would have ranked among general historians, for he styles his history “ Catholic, or Universal.” Of forty books which he wrote, however, only the first five have been transmitted to posterity, with an abridgement of the twelve following, said to have been made by the younger Brutus. General Andreossi appears more partial to this writer than to any of the other antient historians ; he regards him as master of all the tactics of his time, and gives him not less credit for his correct description of all military operations. His style is, however, allowed by all to be harsh and unpolished, and is thus characterized by Mr. Hayley—

“ O highly perfect in each nobler part,
“ The sage’s wisdom and the soldier’s art,
“ This richer half of Grecian praise is thine :
“ But o’er thy style the slighted graces pine,
“ And tir’d attention toils thro’ many a maze,
“ To reach the purport of thy doubtful phrase.”

We cannot sufficiently deplore the loss of Sallust's Roman History from the death of Sylla to the conspiracy of Catiline, for we should doubtless have found in it the same depth of judgment, the same penetrating sagacity, keenness of remark, and profound knowledge of the human heart, that are conspicuous in his other works; and altogether they would have formed a fine code of Roman history during one of the most interesting periods of the Republic, which indeed it is probable the author intended. The style of Sallust is concise, nervous, and sententious. He was accused by his contemporaries of the affectation of using obsolete words and phrases, but I confess I am not critic enough to be a judge of this circumstance, and I find in him nothing but matter for admiration. He particularly excelled in the delineation of character, and in this at least affords a model for all future historians. General Andreossi seems to approve much of his military descriptions, particularly in his history of the Jugurthine war; but the General makes an observation, which, if I understand it properly, surprises me—"The consummate ability with which Metellus extricates his

army and pursues his march, when surrounded by Jugurtha, is the *last* proof left us of Roman skill and ingenuity in the field of action." What does the General make of the campaigns of Cæsar, and even of inferior generals who succeeded him? Mr. Hayley's short character of Sallust contains sound criticism—

- " Sententious Sallust leads the lofty train,
- " Clear, though concise, elaborately plain,
- " Poising his scale of words with frugal care,
- " Nor leaving one superfluous atom there !
- " Yet well displaying, in a narrow space,
- " Truth's native strength, and nature's easy grace ;
- " Skill'd to detect, in tracing action's course,
- " The hidden motive, and the human source."

The history of Livy is certainly a most magnificent work. It is written in a style of grand and flowing, perhaps unequal eloquence. His descriptions, that of the battle of Cannæ for instance, are bold and striking. Yet I confess Livy, with all these excellencies, is no favourite of mine. His gross and glaring partiality disgusts ; and his long and complex periods, and his tedious and declamatory orations tire. General Andreossi holds in little estimation his military knowledge ; indeed accuses him of

such gross ignorance, that he says, "He even forgets that military tactics had undergone a revolution, and most awkwardly confounds the practice of his own time with that of the Scipio's."

As you have seen the dark side of the question, however, it is but just to lay before you the opinion of a critic more favourable to Livy—

"In bright pre-eminence that Greece might own,

"Sublimèr Livy claims th' historic throne;

"With that rich eloquence, whose golden light

"Brings the full scene directly to the sight;

"That zeal for truth, which interest cannot lend,

"That fire which freedom ever gives her friend.

"Immortal artist of a work supreme!

"Delighted Rome beheld, with proud esteem,

"Her own bright image of Colossal size,

"From thy long toils in purest marble rise."

HAYLEY.

From what I have said, you will perceive that the Roman historians have furnished us with examples of two very different forms of style in narrative composition; of the concise, compressed and sententious in Sallust; and afterwards in a still superior writer, Tacitus;

and of the flowing and rhetorical in Livy. Which of these ought to be pursued must depend on the genius and disposition of the writer, and in part on the nature of the subject. Every writer ought however to adopt a uniform style, which, after some practice, will almost come of course, if he writes from himself, and is not content to be a servile imitator of others. I once knew a person who, from habits of imitation, could not avoid at length writing, in some degree, in the style of the author he read last. One ill effect, however, attends the tribe of imitators, that they generally copy the faults, and not the excellencies of their models.

Though a part of the great work of Tacitus bears the modest name of annals, yet it is properly history; for it has not the character of annals. That part which he calls his history was written first, though there is every reason to believe that he meant the whole to form a connected chain, comprehending the history of the Roman empire from the age of Augustus to his own time. There never was a genius more happily adapted to the writing of history than that of Tacitus. He was a statesman and an orator, and master of all the learning of his

age. His discernment and knowledge of human nature are unrivalled. He draws a picture with more animation than I think any other writer; of this a fine instance will be found in the latter part of the second, and beginning of the third book, which describes the latter moments of Germanicus, and the events which immediately succeeded his death. His remarks are keen and profound. General Andreossi says of him—"The man who is called upon to defend his fellow soldiers, whose conduct is to influence the fate of his country, will acquire every information by studying Tacitus." Like his master Sallust, who is evidently in a great degree his model, Tacitus is eminent for his skill in drawing characters.

With Tacitus I may safely close my view of the eminent historians of antiquity, for it is only necessary in such a sketch to notice those who particularly excelled. With the writers of the middle ages I am little acquainted. You will find in Mr. Hayley some very pretty lines on the Princess Anna Comnena, and on De Thou, as well as on Guicciardini and Davila. De Thou I have read in part, but found him dry and tedious, though he occasionally draws

a character in a striking manner. It was however not my intention in this letter to run through the whole catalogue of historical writers, but to point your attention to a few who ought to be studied as models; to give a sort of history of history. I shall therefore pass to those of our own country, for I cannot help subscribing to the honest and impartial testimony of General Andreossi—That “the best historians, at least for the last century, have been English.”

In the rapid survey which I am compelled to make of British historians, I shall pass over such works as Raleigh’s *History of the World*, and Knolles’s *History of the Turks*, as productions long since consigned to the libraries of the curious, and little attractive to the eye of taste, though neither of those which I have mentioned are destitute of merit. Burnet, Ludlow, &c. will be noticed under another head. But I cannot overlook the excellence of one of our early writers, I mean the learned, the manly, the much injured Buchanan. Whether we regard his clearness, his spirit, his love of freedom, or his pure latinity, his history will deserve to rank with some of the best that issued

from the antient schools. There is much good painting in Buchanan; and I particularly recommend to your perusal the interesting scene between Malcolm and Macduff, previous to the fall of the usurper. In the latter periods of his history he has been charged with partiality, but that charge has never been proved. He lived in times when party regarded calumny as a duty, and he embraced the thankless side, the side of liberty.

Clarendon is not to be considered as a general historian, since his subject is confined to the civil wars in the reign of Charles I. and II. Clarendon's history is, however, in all senses of the word, a great work. In style and conduct it comes nearer Livy than any modern performance. He excels in drawing characters, though his portraits are occasionally darkened by the black tinge of party spirit. The style of English composition had not arrived at perfection in his time; and his periods are justly censured as long, embarrassed, and sometimes ambiguous. Yet he was perhaps the first writer in prose who shewed the powers of the English language, and laid the foundation of those beauties which the succeeding age displayed.

It is somewhat singular that the first who composed a good general history of our country should be a Frenchman. To Rapin every successive generation has assigned the praise of industry, accuracy, and impartiality—no slight commendation of an historian. I never read his history in the original, it being superseded in this country by the very slovenly translation of Tindal. General Andreossi, however, who ought to be a judge of the language, denies that he possesses any taste. He is too fond of inserting the whole of documents, of which he should only have given abstracts. Yet whoever would look for truth, the great object in reading history, must still, I fear, have recourse to the ponderous volumes of Rapin. He was greatly assisted by that invaluable collection of records, Rymer's *Fædera*, which continued to be published while he was writing his history. Mr. Hayley denominates him the British Polybius, and adds—

“Thy sword, thy pen, have both thy name endear’d;
“This join’d our arms, and that our story clear’d;
“Thy Foreign hand discharg’d the historian’s trust,
“Unsway’d by party, and to freedom just.”

We had, however, scarcely any work of the historical kind in our language, which deserves

the name of elegant; till the present times. Lord Littleton's *Henry* is a fine and chaste composition, but is rather prolix. It would be unfair, though I dislike his principles both political and religious, to deny Mr. Hume the praise of a chaste, correct, and pleasing writer. I have been told by some who knew him, that he composed with great difficulty, and even with painful feelings; yet his genius seems to me happily calculated for narration. He is clear and spirited; and though he can rarely reach either the sublime or the pathetic, he always interests. Some of his dissertations, as that on the consequences of the invention of gunpowder, &c. might have been omitted; they remind us of scholastic disputations, and have no connexion with a recital of facts. He is not copious; his vocabulary is remarkably limited, but it is well chosen. I wish, however, he possessed more honesty, more industry, and less of that rancorous spirit so peculiarly characteristic of infidels; that even Mr. Gibbon terms Voltaire "a bigot, an intolerant bigot." He frequently misrepresents when party or prejudice offers a temptation; as is particularly evinced in his account of Barebone's parlia-

ment, and the character of Milton,* and his negligence is very reprehensible. I have been told that he has copied pages, I might almost say volumes, from Carte, with only slight alterations in language. All these circumstances render his history of little value as an authentic record.

If I stand in fear of offending our northern countrymen by this qualified censure on Mr. Hume, I hope I shall amply compensate by declaring my unbiassed opinion, that the most accomplished historian of antient or modern times, is Dr. Robertson. His style is rich and copious, and he may be said to wield with ease all the powers and the treasures of the English language. Few provincial or idiomatic phrases appear in his classical pages. He is sufficiently florid and fanciful to interest continually, and yet not so much as to tire or disgust. His arrangement is always luminous, his incidents well selected, and his story well told. The History of Scotland is extremely engaging, and not the least interesting is the detail of domestic

* "When giddy and fantastic dreams abuse"

"A Hampden's virtue and a Shakspeare's muse."

and private transactions, which display the respective characters in the happiest lights. But his great work is the Charles V., a performance which will never be superseded, and which will be read while the English language endures. The preliminary dissertation is the best view which is any where to be found of the feudal institutions, though it might have been spared from the history; for they were almost at an end when the history commenced, and perhaps something still more important might have been substituted in a concise view of the *Jus publicum Imperii*. But how great and how interesting is his account of that amazing event the Reformation! He writes with all his heart; he rises with his subject; he is sublime, pathetic, yet every where rational. He is the only writer who has done justice, or who perhaps could do justice, to the exalted character of Luther. He has drawn him, and indeed all his other characters, with the pencil of a Vandyke, as striking as elegant. His America is the least valuable of his histories; but the subject was better known, and had been treated by other modern historians.

With an imagination more vigorous, and a style more highly ornamented than Dr. Robertson's ; with equal industry, and more learning, Mr. Gibbon has cultivated a long, and as it was thought, a barren tract of history, connecting the antient with the modern. I have no doubt but Montesquieu's tract, "*Sur la grandeur and decadence des Romains*," suggested to Mr. Gibbon this grand and arduous undertaking. Having already spoken of Mr. Gibbon, it is not necessary at present to extend very far the criticism. In this great work whatever is profound in research, brilliant in display, picturesque in description, and enchanting in diction, will be found. Yet I think in luminous arrangement he is inferior to Dr. Robertson. He frequently breaks in upon his main subject by a long dissertation or episode. The 15th and 16th chapters, independant of their pernicious tendency, are too long, and perhaps the whole of his ecclesiastical details might have been curtailed. If in his style there is any fault, it is perhaps an excess of ornament, and this occasionally produces a degree of ambiguity. But his style was character-

istically his own ; and we may apply to him with propriety Mr. Addison's lines on Cowley, taking *wit*, as it was then generally used, for genius or fancy—

“ Pardon great writer, that I dare to name

“ ‘Th’ unnumber’d beauties of thy page with blame ;

“ Thy only fault was wit in its excess ;

“ But wit like thine in any shape will please.”

In my next letter I shall treat of that class of narratives which come under the description of annals, chronicles, memoirs, biography, &c.

LETTER XXII.

Annals.—*Chronicles.*—*Memoirs.*—*Biography,*
&c.—*Froissart.*—*Holingshead.*—*Stow.*—*Cæsar.*—*Princess Anna Comnena.*—*Alber-*
querque.—*Ludlow.*—*Whitlock.*—*Burnet.*—*Dalrymple.*—*Nepos.*—*Plutarch.*—*Dioge-*
nes Laertius.—*Suetonius.*—*Bayle.*—*Dr.*
Johnson.—*Biographica Britannica.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

ANNALS and chronicles with us have nearly the same meaning, and denote a series of facts detailed in the order of time. The one of these words is derived from the Latin *annus* (a year), and the other from the Greek *χρονος* (time). The former, however, was the more antient appellation, for Tacitus entitles the earlier portion of his incomparable history *annales*, and the word *chronicle*, I do not find to have come into use till the middle ages, or rather later; for though our translators have, with some propriety, given that appellation to two of the

books of the Scripture history, the title they bear in the original hardly warrants the translation. A journal or diary is a narrative divided into still smaller portions, and which marks the occurrences of every day.

This species of narrative demands a minute attention to the order of time, and that no event shall be either omitted or introduced out of its regular course. This is a form of composition calculated to cramp the genius. It is too formal to admit of eloquence, and its best commendation is fidelity. This quality indeed we must necessarily require in the annalist; but the graces of style are less confidently expected from him than from the professed historian. In annals and chronicles there is also a more minute and copious detail than in a history, which is a more concentrated view of the subject. Both seem better adapted to the recording of recent events than to the relation of facts long past, and therefore less immediately interesting.

After the revival of letters, the Germans seem to have more particularly applied to the writing of annals than any other of the European nations, and many valuable, though not polished

works, are extant among them under this title. Our learned countryman, Strype, also published annals of the Reformation, which is a work of high authority, but deficient in elegance.

If we except Froissart, whom yet we may almost account an Englishman, the title of chronicles has been, I believe, almost exclusively used by English writers. Froissart's is a correct example of what a chronicle should be. We there find all the minuteness of description and detail, even to the delineation of the arms of the knights, who make the most conspicuous figure in his narrative. But though this style of composition may seem dry and tedious, he has contrived to make it interesting. All the heroes of the time, the King, the Black Prince, Sir Walter Manny, Sir Bertrand de Guesclin, &c. &c. become our intimate acquaintances; we see all their domestic habits, we listen to their familiar conversation. In a studied history we see a picture; in this particular detail we see the men: all is dramatic, and the vivacity of the scene takes off from the prolixity of the detail. Mr. Hayley's character of the writer is tolerably correct—

“ Yet courtesy with generous valour join’d,
 “ Fair twins of chivalry rejoic’d to find
 “ A faithful chronicler in plain Froissart;
 “ More rich in honesty than void of art.
 “ As the young peasant, led by spirits keen,
 “ To some great city’s gay and gorgeous scene,
 “ Returning, with increase of proud delight,
 “ Dwells on the various splendour of the sight;
 “ And gives his tale, though told in terms uncouth;
 “ The charm of nature, and the force of truth,
 “ Though rude engaging,” &c.

But you will know it better from the excellent translation by Thomas Johnnes, Esq., a gentleman who stands distinguished among his contemporaries, as the possessor of a large fortune, while he applies to literature with the industry of an author by profession. The destruction of his invaluable library by fire must be regretted by every friend to historical research, and to elegant literature.

Holingshead and Stow I have not read. They are accused by Cowley of prolixity—

“ I more voluminous should grow,
 “ Chiefly if I, like them should tell,
 “ All change of weathers that befel,
 “ Than Holingshead or Stow.”

It is however no small commendation that our

incomparable Shakspeare is said to have extracted whole speeches, in his historical plays, from these authors, with very little alteration in the diction. Speed is also a chronicler of some notoriety, and it is a little remarkable, that at a period when learning was not so generally diffused as at present, both he and his predecessor Stow, should have been originally taylors.

Memoirs, as the name imports, are memorandums or notes upon history, chiefly relative to facts which have fallen under the writer's own observation. They are commonly made in the order of time, and often in the form of a journal. They admit of a variety of style. They may rise to any height of elegance, or they may be loose and unstudied minutes. The former will class with laboured and artificial compositions, and will admit of any degree of polish; but in general the style should be easy and familiar. The antients called these compositions by the name of commentaries, and the most famous extant are those of Cæsar, containing the particulars of his wars in Gaul and Britain. A more perfect model of this kind of writing cannot be mentioned.

The style is clear and simple, yet sweet and interesting. The arrangement is also luminous, the descriptions chaste and correct, and this work should be studied by every narrator of battles or of travels.

The form of commentaries was adopted by several of the historians of the Greek empire, and even the Alexiad of the accomplished Princess Anna Comnena may be ranged in the same class. I cannot resist the pleasure of transcribing Mr. Hayley's lines on this elegant female—

“For in the lovely charms of female youth,

“A second Pallas guards the throne of truth!

“And with Comnena's royal name imprest,

“The zone of beauty binds her Attic vest.

“Fair star of wisdom, whose unrivalled light

“Breaks through the stormy cloud of thickest night;

“Though in the purple of proud misery nursed,

“From those oppressive bands thy spirit burst;

“Pleas'd, in thy public labours, to forget

“The keen domestic pangs of fond regret;

“Pleas'd to preserve from time's destructive rage,

“A father's virtues in thy faithful page!

“Too pure of soul to violate, or hide

“Th' historian's duty in the daughter's pride.”

The son of the great Albuquerque adopted

also the same title for the historical detail of his father's exploits and conquests in India. It is the best written prose composition in the Portuguese language.

The Latin title commentaries was succeeded by the French word memoirs ; and more works of this kind have been published in France than in any other country, many of them under the title " *Memoirs pour servir a l'Histoire,*" &c. Among a vast class of publications of this description, the *Memoirs* of de Retz, and of the Duc de Sully, stand pre-eminent. The latter is one of the most interesting books I ever read.

In our language we have some excellent historical records under this title, among which I particularly recommend "*Ludlow's Memoirs*" of the civil war, and Cromwell's usurpation. He is a most honest, clear, and interesting writer. It is astonishing that the failure of that great and unfortunate experiment should not have convinced him of the total impracticability of a form of government truly republic. Like all other speculatists, he dreams upon the subject, and retains his prejudices to the last : but we must take the man as he is, and upon other

subjects he is on the whole liberal and candid. Whitlock, who records the same transactions, has entitled his work "Memorials," but this is only to be regarded as a different orthography.

Bishop Burnet's "history of his own times" would have been properly termed memoirs. The composition is so loose, and occasionally so unconnected, and so many private transactions and conversations are recorded, that the work does not properly fall under the denomination of history. I do not mean by this to detract from its merit. As an original and authentic record, it is more valuable than if it had been studied. Whatever he gives upon his own knowledge bears the stamp of truth; but it is not surprising that a writer who narrates all he hears should be sometimes deceived. Mr. Hayley's character of him seems very just—

"Yet Burnet's page may lasting glory hope,
 "Howe'er insulted by the spleen of Pope.
 "Though his rough language haste and warmth denote,
 "With ardent honesty of soul he wrote;
 "Though critic censures on his work may shower,
 "Like faith his freedom has a saving power."

It is a proof indeed of merit, when even Pope could not write him down, though he has class-

ed the good bishop with some very inferior writers in one invidious couplet—

“ From these the world will judge of men and books,
“ Not from the Burnets, Oldmixons and Cooks.”

It is impossible however to read Burnet's history, and not to be involuntarily reminded of the arch ridicule upon it conveyed in the “ Memoirs of P. P., clerk of this parish.”

If Burnet with some arrogance entitled his memoirs a history, Sir John Dalrymple has, with a modesty scarcely less culpable, entitled his history “ Memoirs.” This is an excellent, and on the whole a well written work. It contains some of the best and most judicious political observations that are any where to be found. Though I am an infidel with respect to the charges against those distinguished patriots Russel, Sidney, the Duke of Shrewsbury, &c. yet I believe that Sir John's authorities are fairly quoted ; but let us remember on what evidence the charges ultimately rest, on that of a depraved and intriguing Frenchman.

Biography is a species of narrative nearly connected with history, and is of antient date, though evidently not so old as history ; for we

have nothing that can properly be termed biography in the writing of the Hebrews. The book of Joshua is obviously a continuation of the history from the Pentateuch ; and the book of Job is evidently a poem.* The same may be said of the books of Samuel as of Joshua. The *Cyropædia* of Xenophon is evidently a work of imagination.

For a specimen of regular biography we can therefore extend our views no further back than the work of Cornelius Nepos, who was contemporary with Cicero and Cæsar. Yet from the style in which these lives are composed, and the author omitting to mention them as a new undertaking, we are authorized in supposing that he was not the first in that line of composition. The lives of Cornelius Nepos are dry and methodical, and the style not elegant. Plutarch is a far better writer, though we cannot even compliment him much upon his style. For his labour and research, however, we cannot be too liberal in our commendations. If we consider that he flourished in the time of Trajan, it is impossible not to wonder

* See Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry*.

where he could find his materials for so many ages back. His first remark, in which he draws the line between the age of fable and that of history, made an impression on me when a boy, and has been useful to me ever since. In one opinion respecting Plutarch I suppose I stand alone. I shall have, I dare say, your dissent to encounter, as well as that of all young people, who are generally charmed with them; and perhaps may incur the censure even of the learned. I do not relish his parallels. The lives of no two people can be so much alike as to admit of a close comparison, and Plutarch's are often fanciful and vague; besides that, I cannot see the utility of them. When I first read them they appeared tedious and without an end; and I have not since learned to like them better. The following lines of Mr. Hayley are not uncharacteristic—

- “ Enchanting sage! whose living lessons teach,
- “ What heights of virtue human efforts reach.
- “ Though oft thy pen, eccentrically wild,
- “ Rambles, in learning's various maze beguil'd;
- “ Though in thy style no brilliant graces shine,
- “ Nor the clear conduct of correct design,
- “ Thy every page is uniformly bright
- “ With mild philanthropy's diviner light,” &c.

It is no small praise to say that no author, not even of the higher classics, has been so generally read as Plutarch, or has retained his popularity so long.

Though I cannot recommend it as a model of fine writing, I know few books from which, in the early part of my life, I received more solid and useful information than from Diogenes Laertius. Had it not been for his *Lives of the Sages of antient Greece*, we could have known very little about them, except Solon and Socrates. His account of their doctrines is impartial, for he seems to have been strictly—

“Nullius addictus in verba jurare magistri.”

“Sworn to no master, of no sect am I.”

His record of their sayings is lively and pleasant, and may be considered as a repository of the serious wit of Greece. How he was able to collect those aphorisms is matter of wonder; and I can only suppose that he extracted them from some older collection of lives and chronicles, now probably lost. He is rather defective in method; and, as far as we are judges of a dead language, very deficient in style.

Suetonius, in his *lives of the first twelve em-*

perors of Rome, may be considered either as an historian or biographer. Properly I think the latter, for he relates much of their private lives and transactions. His work is a most valuable collection of facts, and bears the evidence of truth and honesty ; but whoever reads it can scarcely suspect the author to have been a professed rhetorician. The style is homely and abrupt, almost destitute of harmony, and deformed by Greek quotations. For his facts he should be read by all ; for his manner of relating them he will be admired by no person of true taste. Tacitus's *Life of Agricola* cannot be raised by any commendation.

The moderns have excelled the antients in biography. There are many excellent pieces of biography in French : among these I do not class the *Dictionary of Bayle* ; for though it is a vast treasure of antient and modern learning, I think there never was a work composed with so little either of judgment or of taste. The text is a mere *Old Bailey* record ; indeed it is scarcely " the life, character, and behaviour." All that is valuable is contained in the notes, and these are often ill selected, and not less frequently tedious and trifling. *Moreri's*, in point

of utility, is far superior to Bayle; it is indeed a most useful, and on the whole a judicious work.

Our language abounds with excellent biography. The best I ever read is Johnson's Life of Savage. He wrote it *con amore*, if you can excuse this vulgar barbarism. The following sentence I might have cited as a very fine example of climax. After relating that Savage in his distress "walked about the streets till he was weary, and lay down in summer upon a bulk, or in the winter with his associates in poverty, among the ashes of a glass-house," he resumes—

"On a bulk, in a cellar, or in a glass-house, was to be found the author of the Wanderer, the man of exalted sentiment, extensive views, and curious observation; the man whose remarks on life might have assisted the statesman, whose ideas of virtue might have enlightened the moralist; whose eloquence might have influenced senates, and whose delicacy might have polished courts."

From a deficiency of materials I conclude it happened that some of Dr. Johnson's lives of

the poets are little more than mere critical sketches; yet in this point of view they are excellent, and even where the deficiency of materials is most apparent, he contrives to introduce some moral observation, or some short dissertation as valuable as interesting. As I wish rather to make you acquainted with the beauties of authors, than to exhibit a display of my own critical skill, I cannot help transcribing a charming passage from the life of Smith.

“Of Gilbert Walmsley, thus presented to my mind, let me indulge myself in the remembrance. I knew him very early; he was one of the first friends that literature procured me, and I hope that at least my gratitude made me worthy of his notice.

“He was of an advanced age, and I was only yet a boy; yet he never received my notions with contempt. He was a whig, with all the virulence and malevolence of his party; yet difference of opinion did not keep us apart. I honoured him, and he endured me.

“He had mingled with the gay world without exemption from its vices or its follies, but had never neglected the cultivation of his

mind ; his belief of revelation was unshaken ; his learning preserved his principles ; he grew first regular, and then pious.

“ His studies had been so various, that I am not able to name a man of equal knowledge. His acquaintance with books was great ; and what he did not immediately know he would at least tell where to find. Such was his amplitude of learning, and such his copiousness of communication, that it may be doubted whether a day now passes in which I have not some advantage from his friendship.

“ At this man’s table I enjoyed many cheerful and instructive hours, with companions such as are not often to be found ; with one who has lengthened, and one who has gladdened life ; with Dr. James, whose skill in physic will be long remembered ; and with David Garrick, whom I hoped to have gratified with this character of our common friend : but what are the hopes of man ? I am disappointed by that stroke of death, which has eclipsed the gaiety of nations, and impoverished the public stock of harmless pleasure.”

While I am treating of biography, I cannot

pass over that noble monument to national fame, the *Biographia Britannicæ*; a work which I at one time flattered myself with the hope of bringing to perfection; before old age had unstrung my faculties, and palsied my hand. I am disappointed—

“*Optima quique dies miseris mortalibus ævi*

“*Prima fugit, subeunt morbi, histisque senectus.*”

Though debased by a low, and sometimes even vulgar style; though the error of Bayle has been imitated in throwing too much of the matter into notes, yet the *Biographia* is an invaluable work. It is a *Thesaurus* of English literature and science; and is incomparable for one excellence, that of presenting an abstract of almost every valuable work that had ever appeared in this country previous to its publication. The labour of Dr. Campbell, and the original compilers, in making these abstracts, astonishes me, and they will be the means of rescuing many valuable publications from oblivion.

We have long wanted a good general *Biographical Dictionary*; that deficiency is how-

ever now in a great measure supplied by the new edition of that which was originally published in 1761 ; and the public will soon be accommodated with an unexceptionable work of this nature, under the superintendence of our amiable and learned friend Dr. Aikin.

LETTER XXIII.

Voyages and Travels.—*Anson.*—*Hawkesworth.*
 —*Addison.*—*Burnet.*—*Lady M. W. Montague.*—*Johnson.*—*Fictitious Narrative.*—*The Xenophons.*—*Cervantes.*—*Le Sage.*—*Fielding.*—*Smollett.*—*Sterne.*—*D'Arblois.*
 —*Radcliffe.*—*Swift.*—*De Foe.*—*Mrs. Hamilton.*—*Epistolary Writing.*—*Cicero.*—*Pliny.*—*Seneca.*—*Balzac.*—*Voiture.*—*Pope, &c.*—*Dialogue.*—*Plato.*—*Cicero.*—*Lucian.*—*Horne Tooke.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

VOYAGES and travels are another species of narrative which I must not pass over, since it differs in one essential from those which have been already mentioned. It requires considerable powers of description to render it pleasing, and great accuracy of observation to make it useful. The style of these works should be suited to the subject, but in general care should be taken to avoid too much ornament, and espe-

cially the affectation of it. Description is the rock on which most narrators of travels suffer shipwreck, especially when they attempt to be picturesque. They should remember that no language can convey a correct idea of a landscape; and the most laboured effort of this kind will be so different from the reality, that no spectator could possibly recognize it by what he had read. Descriptions of this kind ought therefore to be short and striking; the writer selecting only a few of the prominent features belonging to a place or situation, which will at once be less tiresome, and less likely to mislead than a long detail. In the delineation of manners and customs, language is most powerful; for there are certain well defined, and well known phrases, which can express any thing of this nature, but words cannot describe mere objects of sight; even a portrait can scarcely be drawn in words, so as to express a real likeness. A traveller will be tedious if he describes every thing he sees; selection is as much his duty as that of the historian. All the errors to which I have alluded will be found in most of those ephemeral productions which almost daily choak the press,

and annoy the public, under the title of "Tours to the lakes," "Rambles to watering places," "Scenery in Wales," &c. &c. What can be more uninteresting than travels in this country, along turnpike roads, between quickset hedges, among square or triangular paddocks or fields, and where there can be nothing new or extraordinary in natural produce, architecture, or manners and customs, to awaken curiosity, or to increase our stock of knowledge? Such trash is only calculated to sail silently down the stream of oblivion, with their fit companions, the usual furniture of our circulating libraries.

A traveller, who means to interest or instruct the public, should be properly accomplished for the task, and should at least possess a good general knowledge of most of the popular arts and sciences, particularly natural history, philosophy, chemistry, and painting: he should also possess an enlarged and liberal mind.

There are many excellent narratives of voyages and travels extant, both in French and English, but my limits will allow me only to notice a few of the latter. The popularity of Anson's voyage has established its character, and that popularity (whoever was the writer,

whether Robins the engineer, or the chaplain, (whose name it bears) is not undeserved. It is clear and simple, and the story well told, without episode or superfluous description. Dr. Hawkesworth's voyages are more laboured, and more highly ornamented, but seem to want somewhat of that spirit which a writer who describes scenes in which he had been personally conversant would have infused into them. The simple tale of the illustrious Cook I relish better.

Among our principal travellers, his reputation obliges me to notice Mr. Addison, but it is extraordinary that he, who excelled in almost every other department of literature, should have failed in this. The rapid, yet dull narrative, is hardly enlivened by his beautiful classical quotations. I have seen it somewhere insinuated, that these were transcribed from an Italian author; but this I cannot believe; for few men were more conversant in the classics, or had more taste to relish their beauties, than Mr. Addison.

Bishop Burnet, though possessed of little original genius, is more entertaining as a traveller than even the great writer whom I have

last mentioned. One advantage he had, in adopting the epistolary style, which always imparts an air of ease and sprightliness, and breaks the heavy uniformity of a continued narrative.

The letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague, during her husband's embassy to the Porte, were evidently not written for publication, yet they have been long esteemed the happiest specimen extant of lively and entertaining narrative. Indeed it has by some been asserted that the composition was so excellent and correct that they could not have been written by a lady ; this absurd calumny has, however, been amply refuted by the great talents displayed, particularly in prose composition, by the truly eminent female writers of the present day ; and whoever has read the productions of a More, a Barbauld, a Williams, and a Hamilton, will not think it impossible that Lady Mary's letters should have been the production of a woman. The suspicion probably arose from a surreptitious edition of them having been printed some years ago by a notorious character of the name of Cleland, whose name was sufficient to bring suspicion on whatever he produced. The

mistake is, however, now completely corrected by the publication of her whole correspondence and poems, in five volumes, under the sanction of her grandson, the present Marquis of Bute.

But the most elegant production that has ever adorned this walk of literature, is Dr. Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands*. It is more rich in sentiment than in description; and where the country supplies nothing to arrest the attention of his readers, his fertile mind more than supplies the deficiency. I cannot resist the temptation of transcribing one passage, which displays the author's address in introducing his own reflexions, and his exquisite manner of imparting them. The passage relates to his first landing at Icolmkill, the antient seat of religion and learning. "We were now treading that illustrious island, which was once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion. To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible, if it were endeavoured, and would be foolish if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses, whatever makes the

past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me, and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery or virtue. That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of *Marathon*, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of *Iona*!”

It would however be unreasonable to expect that every book of travels should be as highly finished as if it came from the accomplished pen of Dr. Johnson; that would be to lay an embargo upon much useful information. The simple, but admired narrative of Col. Stedman, never fails to interest and amuse.

There is one species of narrative which remains to be noticed. It might be classed as a kind of biography, but it is properly a work of imagination, I mean fictitious narrative. Respecting what is a mere exertion of fancy, scarcely any rules can be established, and in this respect even Aristotle's poetics have done more harm than good, particularly in the rules

which he pretends to prescribe for dramatic poetry. So much must depend on the author's peculiar genius, the times in which he lives, the subject he undertakes, and many other circumstances, that the only process I can properly adopt is to exhibit a short view of the principal writers in this class.*

Fictitious narrative would be of very remote date if we were to admit in our review those which class under the description of poetry. It would then include all the antient ballads, and even epic poetry itself. But in the present letter I must confine myself to what is strictly prose.

I am disposed myself to place the *Cyropædia* of Xenophon in the class of fabulous narrations, though some have contended for it as a true history. It appears to me as a narrative intended to support a theory, like the *Emilius* of Rousseau, of which it undoubtedly serves as the model. The *Ephesian Xenophon* is the next who furnishes us with a specimen of this

* Since writing the above, however, I have seen some excellent rules for novel writers in the second volume of Mr. Cumberland's *Memoirs*, p. 259.

kind of writing; for his *Ephesian or Loves of Atrocomus and Anthia* is unquestionably a romance. The *Ethiopics of Heliodorus*, or *Loves of Theagenes and Chariclea*, is another production of the same description. The author is supposed to have been bishop of *Tricca*, in *Thessaly*, in the reign of *Theodosius*. I know of nothing of the kind amongst the Romans, unless we consider as such the obscene and nonsensical rhapsody of *Petronius Arbiter*.

What were the *Milesian* and *Ionian* tales it is impossible to say, as we have no remains of them extant; but in the East this kind of composition was composed probably very early (as I believe many pieces in the Sanscrit will testify), and among the Arabians certainly with great success, as instanced in the charming volumes of *Arabian Nights Entertainments*.

In all these Eastern productions there is a mixture of the mythology of the times; and the romances of the middle ages are marked by the same character, and might probably derive their origin from the Saracens, who a few years before had overrun a great part of Europe, and were masters of all the science and literature then extant in the world. The com-

mon subject of these performances is a long continued contest between a knight and a magician. The latter entangles the former in his spells, but the knight, through the assistance of his tutelary saint, and his mistress, is always ultimately victorious. I do not pretend to be conversant in this antiquated branch of reading. You will find the names of the most celebrated romances in Don Quixote, and, to say the truth, I could furnish you with nothing more.

To that incomparable performance let us therefore pass, for it gave a new direction to this fashion of writing, and was the first example of the humorous or satirical romance. Though intended chiefly as a burlesque on this species of writing, yet it contains many fine specimens of genius, independant of the original plan. There is in it some poetry not of the meanest description; and the stories of Dorothea, Cardenio, &c., afford perhaps the models of those affecting stories which have been produced by modern writers. I have read this delightful work more than once in the original. I must observe that no work loses so much by translation; it is impossible to transfuse the *curiosa felicitas* of the author, or the peculiar

humour of Sancho, into any other language. To those also who have visited the country which the author describes, the work will have a double relish; for in many respects the manners and customs remain exactly the same, as well as the face of the country. I must add that I believe it is the first work of the kind that ever contained a strong delineation of character.

If the "Devil on Crutches" and "Gil Blas" are, as some have asserted, originally Spanish, the mantle of Cervantes seems to have been caught up by some kindred spirits. Admitting, however, that the hints might be taken from the "Diablo Cojuello," and "Don Guzman," yet it must be allowed that M. Le Sage has greatly improved upon his originals. He excels in the delineation of character, especially in his Gil Blas, which perhaps is the first work extant in the line of fictitious narrative. But it is too generally known and admired to require either commendation or criticism.

Of the novels of Mr. Richardson I have little knowledge. They were too full of trite sentiment, and too tedious, to engage my attention in my youth, and I have not since attempted

to read them. Persons of great judgment and taste, however, have agreed that the *Clarissa* of this author contains many fine passages, and some pathetic scenes worthy of the pen of the most accomplished tragic writer.

Le Sage seems to have been the model on which our admirable Fielding proceeded in this walk of literature. Yet his first essay in fictitious history, and perhaps his best, was originally designed as a burlesque upon the writings of Mr. Richardson, and particularly his *Pamela*. Perhaps no writer, not Shakspeare himself, has excelled Fielding in the delineation of character. Parson Adams, Barnabas and Trulliber, all three of the same profession, are equally striking, and yet so natural that though few have been ambitious of appearing in the latter characters, the candidates for the honour of representing Parson Adams have greatly outnumbered the cities which contended for the birth of Homer; and in my youth there was scarcely a village in England that did not claim for itself the credit of producing the original from which the portrait was drawn. *Tom Jones*, which by many is considered as Fielding's first performance, is in my opinion infe-

rior to Joseph Andrews. Yet the characters of Squire Western, Partridge, Thwackum and Square, are admirable efforts of inventive genius. His Amelia seems a hasty performance, and is inferior to the other two, though the character of Justice Thrasher may class with any that has been drawn by the hand of this exquisite master.

Smollett, though not equal to Fielding, is yet possessed of a most excellent vein of humour. His characters are in general not quite so natural as those of Fielding; but we must except his sea personages, who are unrivalled. Perhaps he is not quite equal to his great original, at least as far as respects Tom Jones, in the skill and address of conducting a plot, and winding it up in a dramatic manner; yet his novels never fail of exciting the most lively interest in his reader. Roderic Random is very superior to his Peregrine Pickle, independently of the gross deficiency in moral, which is a censure that justly attaches to the latter work. Indeed Tom Jones is in some measure culpable in this respect; for actual vice is treated too much as venial levity, and exhibited in too amiable and alluring a light not to be injurious.

to young readers. Humphrey Clinker, though it has little of plot or story, keeps attention alive by the constant display of odd characters well caricatured, and by an uninterrupted flow of genuine humour. No man can read these performances without regretting that the time and genius of Smollett, instead of pursuing a track for which he was so admirably adapted by nature, should have been wasted on the compilation of a dull, and in all respects very indifferent history.

The popularity of Sterne is so far passed away, that it seems like insulting the ashes of the dead to criticize him with severity. Under the class of fictitious narrative it seems as if we could only consider his *Tristram Shandy*; for in what view to regard the *Sentimental Journey*, whether as truth or fiction, is difficult to determine; nor does it much signify with respect to so contemptible a performance. I heard it once remarked of this work, "That the author seemed to have acted folly purposely for the sake of recording it." The first pages of his *Tristram Shandy* are a manifest theft from the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*. Indeed it has been proved that all his best passages are plagi-

arisms, of which however he made not the best use. I allow him all his merits when I say he had some turn for humour, some taste for the pathetic. But I am convinced that the ephemeral reputation of Tristram Shandy was much increased by the obscene allusions, and not a little by what Dr. Blair not unhappily terms “typographical figures.”

On the modern productions in this walk of literature I am not, for many reasons, disposed to enlarge. I cannot however omit paying a just tribute to the merit of two female writers of the present day. Miss Burney, now Madame D'Arblay, is not without a portion of those talents which distinguished Smollet and Fielding, particularly the art of delineating character, with a better style; and the ingenuity of Mrs. Radcliffe cannot be too much admired, particularly in the happy solutions which she affords of those tremendous scenes of horror with which she so successfully agitates the feelings of her readers. The *Cæcilia* of the former, and the *Mysteries of Udolpho* of the latter, are, in my opinion, their best performances.

It would be trifling to take notice of the

shoals of novels which are annually thrown out upon the public; they are the wretched productions of brain-sick females just escaped from boarding-schools, or of miserable garretteers, who want genius and learning to gain a livelihood in any other department of literature.

Of the serious productions termed novels, the *Rasselas* of Dr. Johnson deservedly holds the first place; and among the shorter tales, those in the *Spectator*, *Guardian*, *Rambler*, and *Adventurer*, are excellent. Perhaps one of the best told stories in our language is that of *Fidelia* in the *Adventurer*, by my late estimable friend Mrs. Chapone.

I cannot dismiss this subject without remarking on the excellence of one fictitious narrative, with which I know you to be well acquainted, I mean *Robinson Crusoe*. Admitting that the author might have received a hint from the adventures of Alexander Selkirk, the merit of the work is entirely independant to the outline of the story. It consists in the excitement which is afforded to industry, and the curious exercise of invention, exemplified in the various expedients of the hero for the supply of his necessities in the forlorn situation to which he is re-

duced. In this view the work is of inestimable value to the young ; and not less so perhaps in the moral and religious reflexions which are occasionally interspersed. The delineation of the feelings of the unhappy exile, at certain periods, is the work of a master, and it is the more forcible because perfectly natural.

Shall I mention under this head that extraordinary performance, “ Gulliver’s Travels ?” It was evidently begun as a *jeu d’esprit* in ridicule of Dampier’s Voyages, and the rage for reading the most exaggerated accounts of foreign countries, which at that time prevailed. The author, however, at last extended it to a political satire, and even to a satire on human nature itself. The two first voyages to Lilliput and Brobdignag, undoubtedly display the fancy of the author to the highest advantage. There is something there in which the imagination of the reader can accompany that of the author. When he transforms men into horses, and horses into men, the fiction is too violent, and no picture can be formed in the mind to realize the description. Without this, every effort of imagination must fail in the effect ; and I believe most writers turn with disgust from this

part of the adventures of Gulliver. The voyage to Laputa, and the flying island, contains some excellent ironical animadversions on the science of his time, and I believe would even excite a smile in a mathematician. Yet more I apprehend might have been made of the subject in the hands of Swift, if he had possessed a more profound acquaintance with the subjects he ridicules, or been less in a hurry. What would Swift have done with the modern self-created philosopher? But the task has been executed with scarcely less spirit, and in a more engaging style, by my excellent friend Miss Hamilton, in her "Modern Philosophers."

It is evident that the epistolary style may be adapted to almost any of the departments of literature. In that may be taught all that is important in science and useful in life. A charming specimen we have of didactic epistles in the Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his Son; and of the narrative and descriptive in those already mentioned, of Lady Mary Wortley Montague. Its force in historical composition is happily exemplified by the History of England in a series of letters, originally attributed to Lord Lyttleton, but really written by a man

of superior genius, Dr. Goldsmith ; and in biography, in a work undeservedly neglected, Lord Orrery's Letters on Swift.

Epistolary writing, however, in the common, and therefore the just acceptation of the word, is confined to those compositions which serve to transact the common business of life, or to promote its most pleasing intercourses. In this point of view letter-writing is the most necessary, at the same time it is happily the most easy, of all literary accomplishments. All that is necessary is some perspicuity in arrangement, and a style unblemished by glaring faults.

I have in general found one caution only necessary to young persons of a tolerable education, in order to enable them to write a good letter, and that is not to attempt to be fine ; but to let the current of their thoughts flow naturally as they would in conversation, to endeavour to practise Swift's maxim of using " proper words in their proper places." Persons endued with much genius and fancy may play with metaphors and similies ; but they must be managed with infinite address, not to destroy the simplicity, and even to obscure the spirit of a familiar epistle. I cannot in this

place omit to mention a most excellent rule of Mr. Shenstone's, from which I have often profited ; if you wish to answer a letter with spirit, answer it as soon as possible after you have received it.

When I speak of letters of business, I would not be understood to recommend the usual forms of mercantile correspondence. They are too technical, too full of expletives, and not always clear. The best rule for a business letter is, to express the object in as few words as possible, in plain but not vulgar phraseology ; and this I am convinced any well-bred man, who has clear ideas of his subject, may easily do, only using the phraseology which commonly occurs in genteel society.

A letter of business is long or short according as the subject may require. On an occasion somewhat out of the course of common affairs, there cannot be a finer specimen than the Epistle of Paul to Philemon, where there is not one redundant word, nor a sentence ill placed. But, without a prejudice from religion or education, St. Paul was the greatest master I have read, in all the excellencies of composition.

As it was very early necessary to men occa-

sionally to communicate their thoughts to each other when separated by distance, examples of epistolary writing occur very early; there are several instances even in the Scriptures. The best collections of letters left us by the antients are those of Cicero, Seneca and Pliny, all of them evidently written with a view immediate or remote to publication. The letters of Cicero are chiefly valuable as far as they are explanatory of events which occurred at a most important period of the history of Rome. They are the productions of an accomplished orator, who, however, from having been long in the habits of composition, probably wrote them with little previous study. But this must be admitted, that they are at least as highly polished as any other of his writings. Perhaps a man, who has a character at stake, ought not to be more slovenly in his letters than in any composition intended for the public.

Pliny is, I confess, a more interesting writer than Cicero, though he chiefly treats of domestic scenes, or matters of taste and literature. More is to be learned from him of the private life and manners of the Romans than from any other writer. The letters of Pliny are, how-

ever, more laboured than those even of Cicero; and I am inclined to think, that epistolary correspondence was at that period of infinitely more consequence than at present. As the art of printing was then unknown, it was one of the modes which men of talents adopted for conveying their sentiments to posterity; and as the learned and the great all corresponded with each other, letters upon interesting subjects were certain to be preserved by others, if not by the authors themselves. Thus Seneca's epistles are to be regarded as a collection of essays or treatises on moral and philosophical subjects. They are however less read than they deserve. They contain a morality so pure and so sublime, that I am inclined to credit the opinion that the author was at heart a Christian. Besides this, you will find in them many excellent practical precepts for the regulation of the studies as well as the conduct of young persons. It is very remarkable that Seneca, who was the richest subject of his time, is in these letters continually declaiming in favour of poverty.

Among the French, Balzac and Voiture were long regarded as models of epistolary writing; but the former is pompous and inflated; and

in the latter there is such a continual affectation of wit and quaintness, that I have seldom read any thing that appeared to me more disgusting. Madame Sevigny has also been much extolled ; but I must differ from those who find much pleasure in drudging through the long series of her letters. I once attempted the task, but I found them so exquisitely trifling ; so little of any thing to interest the understanding or to attract attention ; such an accumulation of empty chit-chat and idle gossip, that I conceived the perusal of them to be an absolute waste of time. Our Lady Mary Wortley Montague is a writer of a superior cast. There is thought, and wit and genius in all her letters, whether she relates her travels, or treats of any subject of taste and literature.

Mr. Pope seems to have formed his epistolary style upon the model of Voiture. It is therefore no wonder that it should in some measure partake of the faults of that writer. Indeed all the brilliancy of Mr. Pope's style, (and no man ever possessed more powers of language than he did) cannot compensate for the studied sentences, and constant affectation of wit, which disfigure the correspondence of Mr. Pope. In

fact his letters are by far the most inferior of all his productions. The letters of Dean Swift, Bishop Atterbury, Lord Bolingbroke, and Lord Peterborough, published in the same collection, are more natural, and consequently better.

A foolish passion lately prevailed for inspecting the private correspondence of every person who had attained either rank or fame. Now the private correspondence of any man, upon ordinary subjects, can afford but little interest. I confess I was disappointed even in the letters of Mr. Gibbon, and perhaps I should be equally so with those of Mr. Burke, or Dr. Johnson. A few very fine letters of the latter, it is true, are preserved, such as that to Lord Chesterfield, the Earl of Bute, &c. But these are written upon important occasions. The truth is, to make a composition perfect there must be subject, and the petty incidents of private life are not subjects that can be expected to engage much of public attention. It is different when the facts described are of general importance. Miss Williams's Letters on the French Revolution deservedly were much noticed, and will be long read, not merely because they are well written, but because the transactions they

detail were of the utmost consequence in an historical point of view.

Dialogue is another *form* of writing. I use this expression, because it may be adapted to any subject, or almost any style. It is, however, a very clumsy mode of conveying either sentiments or facts. The dialogues of Plato may perhaps be excused, if we consider them (as perhaps we ought) transcripts of the delightful conversations of his incomparable master. The science of that period was almost entirely metaphysical. In the present state of things, when a world of facts is displayed to our view, it is therefore not extraordinary that they should be in general uninteresting. As a proof, the best translation of Plato would not at present have a sale.

Many of Cicero's philosophical and critical works are also in dialogue, but I think they would appear to at least equal advantage in a different form. A modern author of great wit and fancy, as well as learning, has also published his critical researches, under the title of *Επεα πλοκίνα*, in dialogue; but the wit and vivacity of the writer enliven the subject, and reconcile us entirely to the manner and form.

It is upon ludicrous subjects, however, and where there is some display of character, that the dialogue form has been most happily employed. It becomes in this instance a kind of little drama. Lucian will be read with admiration and pleasure, as long as there is a relish for wit and fancy in the world. His *πραξις τῶν φιλοσόφων* (or sale of the philosophers), is the best of his dialogues. Lucian has been successfully imitated by Fenelon, and Lord Lyttleton.

LETTER XXIV.

*Description and Origin of Poetry.—Metre.—
Rhyme.—English Metres.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

HAVING endeavoured to present you with a critical view of the various forms of prosaic composition, I shall proceed without further preparation to the enchanting regions of poetry; a fairy land with which, however, you can only become properly acquainted by visiting it in person.

Dr. Blair observes, with some justice, that it is not easy to define “what is poetry;” and yet we may add there is no person of tolerable taste, and common attainments, who will mistake poetry for prose, or prose for poetry. It would be perhaps to speak more correctly to say, it is not easy to define the limits between poetry and prose; for as I have shewn that all good prose, and oratorical prose particularly, falls naturally into a kind of metre, or musical ca-

dence ; so, on the other hand, if we admit metre as an essential adjunct in the definition of poetry, there is a kind of low and colloquial poetry, which is almost prose, and is even little distinguished from it even by the metre ; such is the iambic verse of our own, and even of the Greek tragedies. There are many long speeches in Shakspeare, which a mere auditor could not possibly distinguish from prosaic composition. A specimen occurs this instant to my memory. It is Hotspur's reply to the king's ambassador, Sir Walter Blunt—

“ The king is kind, and well we know, the king
“ Knows at what time to promise, when to pay—
“ My father, and my uncle, and myself,
“ Did give him that same royalty he wears:
“ And, when he was not six-and-twenty strong,
“ Sick in the world's regard, wretched and low,
“ A poor unminded outlaw sneaking home,—
“ My father gave him welcome to the shore :
“ And,—when he heard him swear, and vow to God,
“ He came but to be duke of Lancaster,
“ To sue his livery, and beg his peace ;
“ With tears of innocency, and terms of zeal,—
“ My father, in kind heart and pity, mov'd,
“ Swore him assistance, and perform'd it too.

“ Now, when the lords and barons of the realm
“ Perceiv’d Northumberland did lean to him,
“ They more and less came in with cap and knee ;
“ Met him in boroughs, cities, villages ;
“ Attended him on bridges, stood in lanes,
“ Laid gifts before him, proffer’d him their oaths,
“ Gave him their heirs, as pages follow’d him,
“ Even at the heels, in golden multitudes.”

Perhaps, however, we shall be best enabled to define, or at least to understand the nature of poetry, by reverting a little to its origin. Poetry has certainly originated in that instinctive love of harmony and music, which is implanted in the whole human race. It is impossible to look back to any period of society for the first musical effusions. We find them among the savages of the lowest order, and we find them always there accompanied with words ; for it is a depraved state of the public taste, when they attend to sound alone. This is the act of luxury and that sickliness of taste which perverts the very design of an art ; and that of music was undoubtedly to give force and interest to sentiment and language.

Bishop Lowth has, with great labour, and not with less taste and discernment, traced the

Hebrew poetry to a very early period of society ;* to the exclamation of Lamech, the sixth from Adam, in the fourth chapter of Genesis, and also to the prophetic execration of Noah upon Ham. The inspired benedictions of the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, he proves to have been altogether of the same description ; and, when we proceed a little further in the history of the Hebrew nation, we find the songs of Miriam and of Moses, who, it may be observed, was the reputed author of many of the Psalms now extant, and that of Deborah and Barak, &c. All these we know were adapted to musical notes, and there is undoubted evidence that a great part of the religious service of the Hebrews was performed by both vocal and instrumental music.

If we look into the history of other nations, we shall find all their early compositions to have been poetical, and actually *set* (as we should call it in modern language, perhaps *composed*) to music. Greece for successive ages was possessed of no records but the poetic. The laws themselves were metrical, as Aristotle proves by

* See Lectures of the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, Lect. iv. &c.

the very name *nomai* (laws) by which some of the early popular songs were distinguished. In short, the Germans, the Spaniards, and even the Swedes, had both their antient records and their antient laws in verse. A gentleman, who had seen more of savage life than any man I ever knew, assured me that all the savage nations had their songs adapted to a rude music ; and that the common subjects of these songs were love and war.

Hence I think we have very clearly the origin not only of poetry, but even of numbers or metre. Music was early found to be the most fascinating vehicle for sentiment. The poetry was composed to the music, and not the music to the words, as in modern times. Hence the absolute necessity of *metre* or *rhyme*, or something which should correspond with the musical cadence ; hence the invention of all the different antient metres ; and hence we may lay it down as a maxim that metre of some kind is essential to poetry.

The origin of poetry will explain to us the nature of the style which is appropriated to it, and indeed all its peculiar qualities. It was before men had learned to reason, that they ap-

plied themselves to poetry. There was therefore nothing for them to address but the senses and the passions. Music itself might almost be termed a sensual enjoyment ; when with music therefore was combined all the information that men were capable of receiving in that stage of society, the heroic actions, or miraculous achievements of their ancestors, the entertainment must have been delightful. Still the expression must be such as to excite and engage the passions. The superstition always attached to so early a stage in the history of man, will also account for that alliance with the wonderful, the supernatural, which poetry has always claimed : and hence the origin of poetical machinery. The very poverty of language at this early period, aided by the vividness of an imagination that had none of the polished haunts of men to dwell in, and nothing but the solitude of woods and groves in which to rove, would naturally lead to a language and expression highly figurative and metaphorical.

Hence you have all the ingredients and characteristics of poetry ; and hence it may be defined “ a metrical composition chiefly addressed to the passions, occasionally enriched by

machinery, or at least by the introduction of the supernatural, and expressed in highly figurative language."

This definition, however, though the best that I am able to offer in a general way, is still very imperfect, for it does not embrace what is almost the spirit and essence of poetry. Since it is so difficult therefore to form a definition, let us seek for an etymology? A poem is the production of the imagination or fancy: hence it was originally termed *poema* (a creation) and the writers were called *poietai* (makers). Not that every thing contained in a poem was supposed to be a *new* invention, for that could not be true, and particularly of descriptive poems; but the composition as a whole might be regarded more strictly as an effort of the invention than the detail of facts or arguments, than the records of history, or the reasonings of the logician.

I have defined a poem to be a metrical composition; but I am not going to send you back to your grammar, to descant on the quantities of syllables, to give rules to know a dactyl, a spondee, an iambic, &c. These you have already learned in your prosody. But there is

one distinction between the antient and modern languages, which it becomes necessary to point out. Harmony is an essential part of poetry ; but the harmony of antient and modern verse depends upon very different principles. The antient languages were distinguished by what is called quantity ; the same combinations of letters always formed either long or short syllables ; and by a certain arrangement of these the most perfect harmony could be produced. Modern languages, on the contrary, are defective with respect to the quantity of syllables, the same syllable being sometimes long and sometimes short. Some critics indeed have denied that we have any quantity at all, and say we have only accent, that is, a certain stress laid upon a particular syllable, as attribute, conjécture, compláin, &c. In this however I do not coincide : for a perusal of our best prose writers will convince any one with a good ear that we have quantity, and that on the tasteful and musical admixture of long and short syllables much of the harmony of those writers depends ; as I endeavoured to prove in a former letter. Whatever may be said of our iambics too, it must be allowed that we, as well as the

French, have a dactyl measure, and Dr. Watts, as I recollect, has composed in it some short pieces without rhyme. Yet I must confess that, in the bulk of our poetry, and in our heroic verse in particular, more attention is given to accent than to quantity.

From these defects in our numbers, and to afford us that regular return of the same sound, which seems to constitute the music of verse, modern poets have called in the aid of rhyme; without which, whether it arises from habit or from principle, very little modern poetry can please, or satisfy the ear.

Our English verse then is regulated rather by the number of syllables than of feet, for you will find in what we call our iambic verse, very little attention is paid to the quantity of the syllables, and even some degree of negligence in this respect seems often to add to its beauty and variety; and it depends for its harmony on the rhyme, and on the *pause*, which divides the line into two hemistichs or half verses, and seems to give the reader time to breathe, as

“Awake my St. John—leave all meaner things

“To low ambition—and the pride of kings;

“ Let us—since life can little more supply,
 “ Than just to look about us—and to die,
 “ Expatiate free—o’er all this scene of man,
 “ A mighty maze—yet not without a plan.”

Here the pause is finely varied, and the harmony complete, whereas in verse, where it falls too frequently in the same place, there is always a monotony, and consequently a tameness. It is only a good ear which, with proper practice, can regulate this essential adjunct to good poetry.

Rhyme is not, however, an essential ingredient in English poetry, as the tragedies of Shakspeare, and the epic poems of Milton may satisfy you. It is then called *blank verse*, as wanting the rhyme. Whether blank verse or rhyme is to be preferred is still a matter in dispute among the critics. In tragedy it is certainly more natural, as approaching nearer to prose; but the few successful adventurers in blank verse in the other walks of poetry seems to form a presumptive argument against it. Milton himself appears to be supported rather by the grandeur and sublimity of his thoughts and language, than by the harmony of his numbers.

Our heroic poetry, whether in rhyme or blank verse, consists of ten syllables ; and in rhyme, of couplets, or two lines rhyming to each other. Sometimes, however, a triplet is introduced, or an Alexandrine, or line of twelve syllables. You have an instance of both in these lines—

“ Waller was smooth—but Dryden taught to join
“ The varying verse—the full resounding line,
“ The long majestic march—and energy divine.”

The most frequent measure next to this in English poetry is that of eight syllables. This is often appropriated to ludicrous poetry, such as *Hudibras*, and most of Swift's humorous pieces, and the humour is often heightened by double rhymes. Take for example the first lines of *Hudibras*—

“ When civil dudgeon first grew high,
“ And men fell out they knew not why ;
“ When hard words, jealousies and fears,
“ Set folks together by the ears,
“ And made them fight like mad or drunk,
“ For Dame Religion as for punk,
“ Whose honesty they all durst swear for,
“ Though not a man of them knew wherefore.

“ When Gospel trumpeter, surrounded
“ By long-ear’d rout to battle sounded ;
“ And pulpit, drum ecclesiastic,
“ Was beat with fist, instead of a stick ;
“ Then did Sir Knight abandon dwelling,
“ And out he rode a colonelling.”

It is sometimes however used on more serious occasions, and seems well adapted to tender expression.

Both the ten and eight syllable verses are generally considered as iambics ; but some short poems have only seven syllables, and these may be regarded as trochaic, with a long syllable or double rhyme at the close—

“ Fill the bowl—with rosy wine,
“ Round our temples—roses twine,
“ Crown’d with roses—we contemn
“ Gyge’s—wealthy diadem.” COWLEY.

Many poems, and especially songs, in our language, are written in the dactyl or anapestic measure, some consisting of eleven or twelve syllables, and some of less. Of this measure we have a good specimen in Dr. Byrom’s pretty pastoral, inserted in one of the volumes of the Spectator—

“ My time, O ye Muses, was happily spent,
“ When Phœbe was with me wherever I went,” &c.

What I have said upon this subject will suffice to give you a general idea of metre, at least as far as respects our own poetry. I shall next call your attention to a higher subject, the thoughts and language of poetry. Though this letter is not so long as some that have preceded it, yet I think it will make a better division of the subject to conclude it here, than to enter upon a new and extended subject.

LETTER XXV.

Thoughts and Language of Poetry.

MY DEAR JOHN,

I OBSERVED that my definition of a poem as “a metrical composition,” &c. was, like most definitions, imperfect, for a poem was likewise to be considered as a high and vigorous effort of the imagination. In considering what is requisite to form a poet, both as to choice of subject, thought and language, I cannot do better than take for my text the well-known lines of Horace—

“Ingenium cui sit, cui mens divini^{or} atque os

“Magna soniturum, des nominis hujus honorem.”

HOR. Sat. iv.

“Creative genius and the power divine

“That warms and melts th’ enthusiastic soul;

“A pomp and prodigality of phrase:

“These form the poet.”

There can be little doubt but the poet means by *ingenium* that strong power of mind which, as circumstances require, can form a fable, plot,

or story, and ornament it with characters and circumstances; can create an imaginary land, and people it with imaginary beings; describe what he never saw, or add fancied embellishments to what he had seen.

The first and highest exercise of invention is in the choice and arrangement of the subject, and especially when that subject happens to be altogether fictitious. Yet judgment must here come in aid of fancy, and both must be united to form a perfect poet. There may be fancy without judgment; and in that case men write pretty things, nay sometimes are brilliant; but they never accomplish what is truly great. It is impossible to be poetical without the subject admits of it; unless that is in itself interesting, all the pomp and ornaments of poetry and language will be lavished on it in vain. It would be making a statue of snow, and bestowing on it the art and genius and labour of a Phidias. If on the contrary the subject is well conceived, appropriate beauties will seem naturally to arise out of it, and the execution will be easy in proportion.

The man who attempted to turn the whole Bible into verse did not consider that the whole

of the Bible is not poetical. Milton, on the contrary, seems to have chosen the only scriptural subject that afforded scope for imagination. The fall of our first parents was poetical in itself, and from an obscure passage in the Epistle of St. Jude, the vigorous fancy of Milton has formed the sublime episode of a war in heaven.

Trifling subjects, even in description, afford but little interest. A cowslip, a rose, or a snow-drop are beautiful objects ; but the man who should write a long poem on any of them would seem to be trifling with his reader. I question, from this defect, whether “ the Loves of the Plants ” will live, though enriched with all the beauties of language, and with many new and brilliant thoughts. It was happily ridiculed in a burlesque poem, entitled “ the Loves of the Triangles.” I rejoice in the “ Task ” that produced such an effort from Mr. Cowper’s genius ; without its having been imposed he perhaps would not have written ; but as it is, it must be rather considered as a farrago or collection of fine sentiments and episodes, than as a regular poem. Those subjects which excite most general interest will afford most pleasure,

not only to the reader, but to the author himself; and be most prolific in excellencies and beauties. “Sentiments and descriptions (says Dr. Beattie) may be regarded as the pilasters, carvings, gildings, and other decorations of the poetical fabric; but human actions are the columns and rafters that give it stability and elevation.”

Poetry has been called an imitative art, and so it may be considered in some degree. But though it is an imitation of nature, it must not be, like a Flemish painting, an imitation of nature in every particular. It should be (putting burlesque poetry out of the question for the present) an imitation of nature dignified and exalted, as far as the human imagination is capable of rising.

A fine poem may again be compared to a fine picture. It is to depict nature and hold her up to view; but there is no necessity to exhibit every thing in nature, or combine such actions as might possibly have existed together, though poetically inconsistent with each other. It is by not going beyond the bounds of probability, that in the intervals of some great event, a pert dialogue might take place between some

of the lacquies of the palace, but no writer would introduce this into an epic poem.

What I observed in a former letter on the subject of amplification, is more strictly applicable to poetry than to any other kind of composition. The soul of poetry is detail, for it must ever be considered as a picture. The fairest mark indeed of a vigorous imagination is the power of displaying all the nice and discriminating features of the human character and passions. It shews penetration to observe them, fancy in being able to depict them, and judgment in selecting and arranging them. Shakspeare surpasses all mankind in this excellence; and in Milton, though his subject may seem unfavourable to such a display, the most enchanting passages are of this kind. How minute, and yet how interesting is the following scene, where Adam finds Eve asleep with unusual discomposure in her looks after her alarming dream—

“ Now morn her rosy steps in th’ eastern clime

“ Advancing, sow’d the earth with orient pearl,

“ When *Adam* wak’d, so custom’d, for his sleep

“ Was airy light from pure digestion bred,

“ And temperate vapours bland, which th’ only sound

“ Of leaves and fuming rills, *Aurora's* fan,
“ Lightly dispers'd, and the shrill matin song
“ Of birds on every bough ; so much the more
“ His wonder was to find unwaken'd *Eve*
“ With tresses discompos'd, and glowing cheek
“ As through unquiet rest : he on his side
“ Leaning half-rais'd, with looks of cordial love
“ Hung over her enamour'd, and beheld
“ Beauty, which whether waking or asleep,
“ Shot forth peculiar graces : then with voice
“ Mild, as when *Zephyrus* on *Flora* breathes,
“ Her hand soft touching, whisper'd thus : awake
“ My fairest, my espoused, my latest found,
“ Heav'n's last best gift, my ever new delight,
“ Awake ; the morning shines, and the fresh field
“ Calls us ; we lose the prime to mark how spring
“ Our tended plants, how blows the citron grove,
“ What drops the myrrh, and what the balmy reed ;
“ How nature paints her colours, how the bee
“ Sits on the bloom, extracting liquid sweet.
“ Such whisp'ring wak'd her, but with startled eye
“ On *Adam*, whom embracing, thus she spake.

For the thoughts and ornamental part, poetry draws her resources from every quarter. In this view, if two men are equally gifted with the powers of fancy, he that knows most will be the best poet. The great reading of Milton serves constantly to enrich his poem, and keep

alive the attention of his reader, by fine and vivid allusions and similies, and by occasional descriptions illustrative of his subject; and Shakspeare's rich mind derives embellishments from every thing in nature and art, by means of the slightest associations. There is a pretty thought in *Don Quixote* to this effect, which I formerly transcribed—

“ *La poesia, a mi paracer, es como una doncella tierna, y depoca edad, y en todo extremo hermosa, a quien tienen cuidado de enriquecer, pulir & adornar otras muchas doncellas, que son todas las otras ciencias, y ella ha de servir de todas, y todas se han de autorizar con ella.*”

“ Poetry may be compared to a beautiful young female, attended by several other females, whose care and occupation it is to dress and adorn her; these she regularly employs in her service, while they on their part derive credit and estimation from her.”

To prescribe rules for the production of beautiful thoughts in poetry, would subject the empiric who made the attempt to well merited ridicule. Something of this kind was however attempted some years ago in *Byshe's Art of Poetry*, where a kind of common-place book is

exhibited of poetic ideas suited to a variety of subjects. The writer, however, who proceeded upon such a plan would be a plagiarist and not a poet. It is extensive reading and observation that must treasure up a stock of materials, and it is genius alone that can form those fine, and fanciful, and striking combinations, that can enchant the reader. Unquestionably the taste, nay perhaps the imagination may be cultivated and improved; but this can only be done by reading most attentively the best models, discriminating, marking, and dwelling upon their beauties. Seneca, in one of his epistles, strongly recommends the reading over and over a few good books in preference to the busy and cursory perusal of many. To a young poet I am sure this is the soundest advice that can be given. The really good poets are few, and to these he ought to give such attention as to be master of their style of thinking, of every peculiar form in which they express themselves.

No critical rules can give genius. They are rather calculated to restrain and govern its eccentricities. They may prevent faults, but cannot invent beauties. Perhaps what I have observed on the sublime and pathetic may be

of some use in pointing out the nature of these sources of fine thought ; but what is the use of knowing from what country a valuable commodity is procured, unless you have the means of making it your own ?

I shall therefore employ both my own time and yours better in pointing out some of the errors into which young writers are liable to fall, than in attempting to

“ Write dull receipts how poems should be made.”

1st. Every ornamental thought in poetry should flow naturally out of the subject. It should not, in the hacknied phrase, “ smell of the lamp.” It should be a volunteer, not pressed into the service. In Virgil himself, whom as a poet I almost idolize, I seem sometimes to have discovered this fault. The beautiful lines, which on a former occasion I quoted from the 3d Georgic—

“ Optima quæque dies,” &c.

I have always thought misplaced, and much too good for the subject. But in inferior writers you will frequently find thoughts forcibly introduced as from a common place-book,

which are very remotely connected with the subject.

In Shakspeare's Hamlet, the fine soliloquy "To be or not to be," &c. seems forced in, as there is no other part in the action where it is noticed that Hamlet entertained a notion of destroying himself, and it is altogether inconsistent with his engagements to the ghost of his father.

2d. Trite and common thoughts, or reflexions, however moral they may be, instead of beauties are blemishes. In poetry we expect novelty and ingenuity both in thought and expression. When the poet says of Shakspeare—

"Each change of many colour'd life he drew,
"Exhausted worlds, and then imagin'd new:
"Existence saw him spurn her bounded reign,
"And panting Time toil'd after him in vain."

We find not less of novelty than of grandeur in the image; and in this of Shakspeare—

"Cowards die many times before their deaths,
"The valiant never taste of death but once."

The sublimity of the thought is rather in-

creased than diminished by the ingenious turn which is given to it.

Satan's address to the Sun in Milton is finely imagined, and the turn which is given to it, while it is highly in character, enlivens by a kind of emotion of surprize—

“ O thou that with surpassing glory crown'd,
 “ Look'st from thy sole dominion like the God
 “ Of this new world, at whose sight all the stars
 “ Hide their diminish'd heads, to thee I call,
 “ But with no friendly voice, and add thy name,
 “ O sun, *to tell thee how I hate thy beams,*” &c.

To shew how vulgar and common images debase a subject, I need only quote the following lines from no less a poet than Dryden—

“ The rage of jealousy then fir'd his soul,
 “ And his face kindled like a *burning coal.*”

PALAMON AND ARCITE, BOOK I.

Again—

“ Nought profits him to save abandon'd life,
 “ Nor vomits upward aid, nor downward laxative.”

IBID.

No man excelled Mr. Pope in ingenuity of thought—

- " Friend to my life (which did not you prolong
 " The world had wanted many an idle song)
 " What drop, what nostrum can this plague remove;
 " Or which must end me, a fool's wrath or love?"

 " How can I Pulteney, Chesterfield forget,
 " While Roman spirit charms, and Attic wit?"

 " Is that too little? Come then I'll comply,
 " Spirit of Arnall! aid me while I lie!
 " Cobham's a coward, Polworth is a slave,
 " And Lyttleton a dark designing knave," &c.

Yet Mr. Pope could write this execrable couplet—

- " Grac'd as thou art with all the pow'r of words,
 " So known, so honour'd in the house of lords."

3dly. However we may prize ingenuity of thought, too much caution cannot be exerted in avoiding conceit or affectation. One of the worst conceits upon record is that of Cicero, happily ridiculed by Juvenal—

- " O fortunatam natam, me Consuli, Romam!"
 " Fortune fortun'd the happy day of Rome,
 " When I, her Consul sole, consol'd her doom."

DRYDEN.

In the Troas of Seneca, which however cou-

tains some good passages, could we expect to find Hecuba lamenting the manner of her lord's death in two miserable puns—

“ Ille tot regum parens

“ Caret sepulchro Priamus, & flamma indiget

“ Ardente Troja.”

“ The father of a race of kings

“ Now lacks a grave, nor finds a fun'ral torch,

“ While his whole city burns.”

Among the conceits of modern poetry, I cannot but reckon a thought which has been admired, when the poet terms the evening dew

“ The *tears* of the day for the loss of the sun.”

You will find innumerable examples of this blemish in the learned criticisms of Martinus Scriblerus.

The LANGUAGE or dialect of poetry is essentially different from that of prose. This every person who reads it feels and acknowledges, though few are able to assign the reasons. They appear to me to result partly from poetry, being of a more durable character, and partly from whatever is addressed more to the passions than to the reason, requiring a higher colouring.

1st. The first remarkable difference between poetry and prose is, that the former admits of the use of words and expressions which in the latter would be accounted obsolete. This principally arises from the permanent or stationary character of poetry. Milton, Shakspeare, and even Spencer may be still read with pleasure, while the prose writers of their time would scarcely be endured. The reason is plain—Prose in some measure imitates and depends on the style of conversation, and that is varying almost every day. We find expressions even in the Spectator, which from their having become colloquial would be accounted vulgar in any prose composition. Poetry survives these vicissitudes, and therefore many words in Shakspeare and Milton, which perhaps the age immediately succeeding would have regarded as low, are now consecrated by time.

A further reason why words almost obsolete are tolerated in poetry is, that they serve to raise it above common language, and therefore impart to it a kind of dignity and elevation. Mr. Gray, in one of his letters, selects from Dryden the following instances of poetical licence in the revival of old words and phrases—

“ Full of *museful mopings* ; unlike the *trim* of love ; a pleasant *beverage* ; a *roundelay* of love ; stood silent in his *mood* ; with *knights* and *knaves* deformed ; his *boon* was granted ; *wayward* but wise ; *furbished* for the field ; *doddered* oaks ; *disherited* ; *smouldering* flames ; *retchless* of laws ; *crones*, old and ugly ; the *beldam* at his side ; *villainize* his father’s fame.”

Mr. Gray himself indeed affords us, through the whole of his poems, happy examples of this liberty when under the controul of taste, serving to elevate the diction of poetry—as “ *ruthless* king ; scatter’d wild *dismay* ; *shaggy* steep ; wound his *toilsome* march in long *array*.”

Dr. Beattie also notes the following expressions as being peculiar to poetry—*amain*, annoy (a noun), anon, *aye* (ever), *behest*, *blithe*, *brand* (sword), *bridal*, *carol*, *dame* (lady), *fell* (adj.), *gore*, *host* (army), *lambkin*, *lay* (poem), *lea*, *glade*, *gleam*, *lore*, *meed*, *orisons*, *plod* (to travel laboriously), *ringlet*, *rue* and *ruth*, *spray* (twig) *steed*, *strain*, *strand*, *swain*, *thrall*, *thrill*, *troll*, *wail*, *welter*, *warble*, *wayward*, *woo*, the *while*, *yon*, of *yore*.

He adds the following, as not being in so common use—*appal*, *arrowy*, *attune*, *battailous*,

breezy, car, clarion, cates, courser, darkling, flow'ret, emblaze, circlet, impearl, shadowy, streamy, troublous, madning, viewless, clang, clangor, choral, bland, dire, ensanguin'd, ire, ireful, lave (to wash), nymph (a lady), orient, philomel, jocund, rapt, redolent, refulgent, vernal, zone, sylvan, suffuse.

Yet there is a medium to be observed in the use of antiquated phraseology; and Mr. Pope's advice on this subject should be in the mind of every poet—

“ Be not the first by whom the new are try'd,
 “ Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.”

Dr. Beattie observes, that “ a word which the majority of readers cannot understand without a glossary, may be considered as obsolete.” But this rule is too indefinite, and it would perhaps be better to draw a line of demarcation, and to say that a word or phrase which has not been in use since the time of Shakspeare inclusive, should be considered as inadmissible.

2dly. Some of our poetical words take an additional syllable, as dispart, distain, enchain, &c. While others are made shorter, as vale, trump, clime, submiss, drear, dread, helm,

morn, mead, eve and even, 'gan, illume, ope, scape, &c.

3d. Certain abbreviations, and particularly the cæsura, by which a letter is cut off from the beginning and end of a syllable, are admissible in poetry, which are not allowable in prose—such as 'ts true, o'er, e'er, ne'er, &c.

“ 'Twas on a lofty vase's side.” GRAY.

The cæsura is instanced in the following line from the same exquisite poet—

“ T' alarm th' eternal midnight of the grave.”

4th. Poetry admits of a bolder transposition of words than prose. This would be better exemplified from the Greek and Roman classics than from our own; yet even among our English writers some bold, and almost violent transpositions may be found; and particularly in Milton.

5th. The “*os magna soniturum*” must not be forgotten in poetry. Where a word therefore may be made to have a fuller and more impressive application, that form should be in general preferred. Thus, instead of the adjective the participle is frequently employed; as for various, varying. In the same manner

poetry transforms nouns into verbs and participles ; as from the noun hymn, the poets have made a verb, to hymn ; from picture, “ the pictured walls ;” from cavern, “ the cavern’d roofs, &c.

6th. The soul of poetry is particularizing and bringing to view the minute circumstances which give “ a local habitation and a name” to the subject, and animation to the picture.

“ Musis amicus, tristitiam & metus

“ Tradam protervis in mare CRETICUM

“ Portare ventis.” HOR.

“ While in the muses’ friendship blest,

“ Nor fear nor grief shall break my rest ;

“ Bear them ye vagrant winds away,

“ And drown them in the Cretan sea.”

FRANCIS.

“ Full *ten* years slander’d, did I once reply ?

“ *Three thousand* suns went down on Welsted’s lie.”

Had the poet only said that “ he had been long calumniated without replying, and that much time had passed before he noticed the slanderous falsehood of Welsted,” it is evident that the thought would have wanted all that force and beauty which it derives from the happy expression of Mr. Pope.

It is for the same reason, namely, to give life to the picture, that poetry often uses a periphrasis, rather than a plain and simple description. Two lines of Virgil will give you a sufficient idea of this—

“ Depresso incipiet jam tum mihi taurus aratro

“ Ingemere, & *sulco attritus splendescere vomer.*”

“ Then with the crooked plough the steers shall groan,

“ And the keen share shall brighten in the furrow.”

Again in the 2d *Æneid*—

“ Vertitur interea cœlum, & ruit oceano nox.”

“ Now had the sun roll’d down the beamy light,

“ And from the caves of ocean rush’d the night.”

7th. Poetry admits of more and stronger figures than prose; and particularly the *prosopeia*. Thus Milton, describing the song of the nightingale, says “ Silence was pleased;” and on the approach of morning—

“ Now morn her rosy steps in th’ eastern clime

“ Advancing, sow’d the earth with orient pearl.”

The morning is a favourite topic with poets. Some will perhaps prefer to the imagery I have just now quoted, that of Shakspeare—

“ But look the morn in russet mantle clad,
“ Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastern hill.”

HAMLET.

But perhaps the most beautiful instance in our language of this fine figure is in the incomparable address to light in the opening of the third book of *Paradise Lost*; where, I may add, in little more than fifty lines you will find almost every poetical beauty concentrated.

8th. Epithets are allowed in greater abundance in poetry than in any description of prose, without excepting oratory itself. Even compound epithets are sometimes necessary adjuncts in poetry; though I do not know any case where they can be legitimately admitted in prose. Such phrases as cloud-capt, many-twinkling, heaven-kissing, spirit-stirring, heaven-taught, bright-haired Vesta, vale-dwelling lily, would be wholly inconsistent with the gravity and sobriety of prose.

In the same “ pomp and prodigality of phrase,” poets frequently employ what I may call a string of epithets, while humble prose shrinks almost from the dangerous application of even a single one. Thus Virgil—

“*Monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum.*”——ÆNEID III.

“A monster grim, tremendous, vast and high,
“His front deform’d, and quench’d his blazing eye.”
PITT.

“And the plain ox,
“That harmless, honest, guileless animal,
“In what has he offended?” THOMSON.

There is not however a more delicate part of the poet’s task, nor one that requires more caution, than the use of epithets. Unless they tell something, add something to the picture, they are mere expletives, cold, and insipid. If again they are mean or colloquial, they debase the subject. In the following lines you see both these faults exemplified—

“The chariot of the King of kings,
“Which *active* troops of angels drew,
“On a strong tempest’s *rapid* wings,
“With *most amazing* swiftness flew.”

TATE AND BRADY.

Epithets also sometimes obscure the sense, by crowding too many thoughts or ideas together. A judicious poet will therefore never introduce an epithet, but when it is wanting, or when it

adds something to the sense, by its sublimity or novelty.

9th. After all, the distinguishing character of poetry, as far as regards the style, lies more in the rejection than in the adoption of particular phrases or forms of speech. Whatever is technical, common, or colloquial, is inconsistent with the “*os magna soniturum*.” I must except the ludicrous, where the phraseology can scarcely be too common or vulgar, if happily introduced, as the readers of Hudibras and Peter Pindar must continually experience. But where dignity is expected, a phrase, though not low, or vulgar in itself, yet being common in prose writing or conversation, will commonly degrade. Two instances from a good writer will serve to convince you—

“ A tribe who *singular* religion love,

“ And haunt the lonely coverts of the grove.”

ROWE’S LUCAN.

“ It look’d as fortune did *in odds* delight,

“ And had in cruel sport ordain’d the fight.”

IBID.

I must add another example where the word is not exceptionable in itself, for it is a word

that must be used; but it is here introduced in a common colloquial way—

“ He copies from his master Sylla *well*,
 “ And would the dire example far excel.”

ROWE'S LUCAN.

Mark with what different effect the same little, and really mean word, is introduced by the taste of Pope, even at the end of a line—

“ If such there be, who lov'd so long, so *well*,
 “ Let him our sad, our tender story tell.
 “ The well-sung woes will sooth my pensive ghost;
 “ He best can paint them who shall feel them most.”

ELOISA.

I cannot conclude this branch of my subject better than with a quotation from Dr. Johnson's *Life of Dryden*, which says almost every thing that can be said upon it.

“ There was, before the time of Dryden, no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Words too familiar or too remote, defeat the purpose of a poet. From those sounds which we hear on small or coarse occasions, we do not easily receive strong im-

pressions or delightful images ; and words to which we are nearly strangers, whenever they occur, draw that attention to themselves which they should convey to things.

“ These happy combinations of words, which distinguish poetry from prose, had been rarely attempted ; we had few elegancies or flowers of speech ; the roses had not yet been plucked from the bramble, or different colours joined to enliven one another.”—JOHNSON’S DRYDEN.

I do not conceive that much advantage can arise from an endeavour to class or to describe the different styles appropriate to each peculiar kind of poetry. Almost every subject, and every good author, will have a peculiar style ; and no man of any taste would compose a pastoral in the style of *Paradise Lost*, or an heroic poem in that of Horace’s epistles, or Swift’s verses to Stella. Critics, however, have agreed to distinguish the gradations of poetical language into the sublime, the middle, and the plain or simple styles. Milton and Gray may be cited as examples of the first. Mr. Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, and his satires, for the *Eloisa* is of a sublimer character, may be referred to the second. The plain or simple style is almost

wholly confined to songs and pastorals; but we have in English, though the Greeks and Romans had not, a low and familiar style, which is applicable to subjects of humour and burlesque, where cant phrases, proverbs and expressions peculiar to certain trades are introduced; such is the poem of Hudibras, many of Swift's satirical pieces, the burletta of Midas, and many similar dramatic productions.

LETTER XXVI.

*The Epigram and Epitaph.—The Sonnet.—
Pastoral Poetry.—Theocritus.—Virgil.—
Spencer.—Phillips.—Gay.—Shenstone.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

IN treating of the different forms of poetical productions, I might have adopted a general division, similar to that in which I arranged compositions in prose. They might in general be classed under the didactic, and the narrative and descriptive; and I might shew that each of these requires a distinct style, as well as a different arrangement from the other. But as the different kinds of poetry have been, almost from the first cultivation of the art, distinguished by peculiar names, I shall be more generally understood if I adopt no new arrangement, and describe them under those characters by which they have been known for ages.

The antient critics enumerated seven distinct classes or kinds of poetry: the epigram, the

elegy, the bucolic or pastoral, the lyric, the satiric, the dramatic, and the epic. It is wonderful that though they had the works of Hesiod before them, and afterwards the incomparable Georgics, and Art of Poetry of Horace, they should have omitted so important a class as the didactic. Of poetry professedly descriptive the antients had indeed almost none; nor till the time of Phædrus, scarcely any tales or fables in verse. The modern epitaph may also be considered as a new species of poetry, unless it may be regarded as a kind of short elegy; for it cannot properly class with the epigram, either according to the antient or modern acceptation. The sonnet is also an entire modern invention, unless it is regarded as a short ode.

I must therefore adopt a new classification, and as it has been usual to begin with the lighter and more trifling kinds of poetry, I shall treat of them in the following order: 1st. The epigram; 2d. the epitaph; 3d. the sonnet; 4th. pastoral; 5th. didactic poetry; 6th. satire; 7th. descriptive; 8th. elegy; 9th. lyric poetry; 10th. the drama; and lastly, epic or heroic poetry.

I. The word EPIGRAM means an inscription,

from the Greek preposition *επι*, upon; and *γραμμα*, a writing; having been generally engraven or written on pillars, porches, or the pedestals or bases of statues. The modern sense is somewhat different. It now means a short and witty poem, the point or humour of which is expressed in the latter lines. Yet even in the Greek epigrams (properly so called) or inscriptions, there was a terseness and point approaching to the modern idea. Such was the famous inscription on the statue of Venus by Praxiteles—

Γυμνην οἶδε Παρις με, καὶ Ἀγκίστης, καὶ Ἀδωνις,
Τὸς τρεῖς οἶδα μόνους, πρᾶξιλλης δὲ ποθιν?

“Thrice by three mortals was I naked seen,
“But where unrob’d with this vile artist been?”

Mr. Prior has very happily extended this thought in the following pretty little poem, which has the true spirit of the epigram—

“When Chloe’s picture was to Venus shewn;
“Surpriz’d the goddess took it for her own.
“And what said she does this bold painter mean?
“When was I bathing thus, and naked seen?
“Pleas’d Cupid heard, and check’d his mother’s pride;
“And who’s blind now, mamma? the urchin cried.

“ ’Tis Chloe’s eye, and cheek, and lip and breast,
“ Friend Howard’s genius fancied all the rest.”

By the way, while I am speaking of inscriptions, I must mention a very good couplet, written I believe by Mr. Pope, and engraven on the collar of a dog belonging to the late Princess Dowager of Wales—

“ I am her Highness’ dog at Kew—
“ Pray tell me, Sir, whose dog are you ?”

Another extempore epigram by the same hand will give a good idea of this kind of poem. It was written on glass with the diamond pencil of the late Lord Chesterfield—

“ Accept a miracle, instead of wit;
“ See two dull lines with Stanhope’s pencil writ.”

Martial is the author among the antients whose poems approach the nearest to the modern idea of epigram. Those of Catullus I do not account such, though they go by that name. Several of Martial’s have wit, though many of them appear to be merely short complimentary poems, such as are many of Waller, Cowley, Prior, and our other English *poetæ minores*, modern and antient.

The following will serve to give you an idea of the wit of Martial—

“ Petit Gemellus nuptias Maronillæ,
“ Et cupit, & instat, & precatur, & donat.
“ Adeone pulchra est? Immo fædius nil est,
“ Quid ergo in illa patitur & placet? Tussit.”

“ Curmudgeon the rich widow courts,
“ Nor lovely she, nor made for sports;
“ ’Tis to Curmudgeon charm enough,
“ That she has got a church yard cough.”

“ Ad cœnam nuper Varus me fortè vocavit,
“ Ornatus dives parvula cœna fuit.
“ Auro, non dapibus, oneratur mensa ministri
“ Apponunt oculis plurima, pauca gulæ.
“ Tunc ego non oculos, sed ventrem pascere veni:
“ Aut appone dapes, Vare, vel aufer opes.”

“ With lace bedizen’d comes the man,
“ And I must dine with Lady Anne.
“ A silver service loads the board,
“ Of eatables a slender hoard.
“ Your pride and not your victuals spare;
“ I came to dine, and not to stare.”

“ Cum sitis similes, paresque vitæ,
“ Uxor pessima, pessimus maritus,
“ Miror, non bene convenire vobis.”

" Alike in temper and in life,
 " A drunken husband, sottish wife,
 " She a scold, a bully he—
 " The devil's in't they don't agree."

" Callidus imposuit nuper mihi caupo Ravennæ,
 " Cum peterem mixtum, vendidit ille merum."

" A landlord of Bath put upon me a queer hum,
 " I ask'd him for punch, but the dog gave me mere-
 rum."

" Non amo te, Sabidi, non possum dicere quare,
 " Hoc tantum possum dicere, non amo te."

" I do not like thee Dr. Fell,
 " The reason why I cannot tell;
 " But I don't like thee Dr. Fell."

" Quem recitas meus est, Fidentine, libellus;
 " Sed male cum recitas, incipit esse tuus."

" The verses, friend, which thou hast read are mine;
 " But as thou read'st them, they may pass for thine."

" Texatus pulchre rides mea, Zoile, trita;
 " Sunt hæc trita quidem, Zoile, sed mea sunt."

" You're fine, and ridicule my thread-bare gown;
 " Thread-bare indeed it is—But 'tis my own."

I have inserted so many specimens not only
 to introduce you to an author, who is seldom

read in schools, but to prove what to me is very clear, that the modern notion of epigram is taken from these lively and pointed sallies of Martial, from whom I might have extracted many more. You will see from these, and what have preceded, that an epigram (in the modern sense) is no more than a witticism in verse; and almost any good jest or repartee put into verse will make an epigram.

This being the case, since wit is more particularly the characteristic of the British islands than of any other nation, it is no wonder that the English language should abound in excellent epigrams. A great number will be found in all good poetical selections, particularly in that by Dr. Knox, under the name of *Elegant Extracts*. The Earl of Rochester wrote some good epigrams. That in which he so happily characterized Charles II. is admirable; but Prior is perhaps the best writer of epigrams in our language. Some entire poems may be regarded as altogether epigrammatic. Such are many of Swift's, the satires of Dr. Young; and Dr. Goldsmith's *Retaliation*, is as a series of epigrams from the beginning to the end, as well as an ode to Pinchbeck, published some

years ago. I shall add one or two from memory, which I believe are not to be found in the collections.

Soon after the affair of Lord Keppel, and the victory of Sir George Rodney, the corporation of London voted the freedom of the city to the former in a box of heart of oak, and to the latter in a gold box. The following epigram appeared in the newspapers—

“ Each admiral’s defective part;
“ Satyric cits you’ve told ;
“ The cautious Lee-shore wanted heart,
“ The gallant Rodney gold.”

The receipt tax, which was at first very obnoxious, was introduced in the time of the famous coalition ministry (that of Lord North and Mr. Fox), and the following epigram was on that occasion handed about—

“ Premier, says Fox, let’s have a tax
“ That shall not fall on me—
“ Right, says Lord North, we’ll tax receipts,
“ For these you never see.”

I add one from a deservedly popular collection of poems, published by a friend of mine;

under the quaint and homely title of *Salmagundi*.

Written after hearing a dull sermon from a dignitary of the church, on the words “watch and pray.”

“ By our pastor perplext,
“ How shall we determine?
“ ‘ Watch and pray’ says the text,
“ ‘ Go to sleep’ says the sermon.”

Though the epigram is in general applicable to topics of mirth and gaiety, yet even the most serious subjects have sometimes been agreeably presented in this form. The old French epigram on the fasts of the Romish church is striking. It is thus Englished, I believe, by Swift—

“ For who can think with common sense,
“ A bacon slice gives God offence?
“ Or that a herring has a charm
“ Almighty vengeance to disarm?
“ Wrapt up in majesty divine,
“ Does he regard on what we dine?”

But there is something approaching the sublime in the following of Dr. Doddridge on the motto to his own arms—

“Dum vivimus, vivamus.”

“Live while you live, the epicure would say,
 “And grasp the pleasures of the passing day:
 “Live while you live, the sacred preacher cries,
 “And give to God each moment as it flies—
 “Lord, in my view let both united be!
 “I live in pleasure, while I live to thee,

Even a good pun may constitute the basis of an epigram, though such will not bear Mr. Addison's test of translation. One example will suffice.

To a bad Fiddler.

“Old Orpheus play'd so well, he mov'd Old Nick;
 “But thou mov'st nothing but thy fiddle-stick.”

II. The EPITAPH is nearly allied to the epigram, and has a similar derivation, from the Greek *επι* & *ταφος*, meaning literally an inscription on a tomb. Like the epigram too it was originally very simple in its structure, consisting often of only a single line, or even of a few words, which served to attract the notice of the passenger, and to pay him the customary compliment of wishing him well; as if the deceased had been alive and meeting him, saluted him in the usual manner. Like the epigram, how-

ever, the epitaph soon assumed a kind of pointed or witty construction. Perhaps it is natural in every one who writes a short poem of any kind to endeavour to conclude with something impressive.

I do not however think those the best epitaphs which conclude epigrammatically, and still less wittily. Prior's, as well as Gay's, are faulty in this respect. The latter affects something serious it is true—

“ Life's but a jest, and all things shew it—

“ I thought so once, but now I know it.”

But Prior's is too light and trivial for a Christian cathedral, where all should be solemn and suited to the place ; calculated to remind us of our mortality, and inspire us with pious sentiments—

“ Monarchs and courtiers, by your leave,

“ Here lie the bones of Matthew Prior ;

“ The son of Adam and of Eve ;

“ Let Bourbon or Nassau go higher.”

I cannot even pass without blame, on this account, Mr. Pope's celebrated epigram on Sir Isaac Newton—

“ Nature, and Nature’s laws lay hid in night :

“ God said, let Newton be, and all was light.”

This is a mere epigram. Dr. Johnson censures very justly the mixture of two languages on the tomb of Newton, and criticizes the Latin; but I really think the Latin preferable to the English. The thoughts in both are borrowed.

It is not easy to establish any rules for an epitaph, because it must vary according to the person and circumstances; yet a few general precepts may be recommended—1st. The *name* of the person intended should be always introduced, which in verse is not easy, and is too commonly omitted; 2d. Something of the character of the deceased should be introduced, but with as little flattery as possible. Indeed, if the character of the deceased is not given, the epitaph is not his, but will serve for any body; 3d. The *place* in which epitaphs are usually inscribed ought never to be forgotten, and for this reason every thing light and trifling should be avoided. Where is the excellence of that epitaph recorded by the Spectator?—

“ Here lies the body of John Saul,

“ Spital-fields weaver—and that’s all.”

It is a poor conceit founded on a kind of disappointment to the reader, without imparting any instruction whatever, and calculated to raise a laugh in that place, and on that occasion, where risibility must be most improper.

In truth I have seen few good epitaphs. Those of Mr. Pope are, on the whole, the best; and yet whoever will read the criticisms of Dr. Johnson on them, as annexed to some editions of the *Idler*, and to his *Life of Pope*, will see the difficulty which attends this species of composition. These criticisms are in general extremely judicious; but I cannot help remarking one error, into which I could scarcely believe Dr. Johnson could have fallen. It is on the epitaph on Gay, which the critic seems to have treated throughout with unusual severity. This is the line—

“ In wit a man, simplicity a child.”

Dr. Johnson seems to have taken the word *wit* in the common acceptation at present, whereas it is evidently used in the old acceptation for *genius* (*esprit*)—

“ True wit is nature to advantage drest,

“ What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d.”

But if it is the “wit of a man” to which the critic objects, he ought to have known that “a man” used in this kind of connexion means the perfection of human nature—

“Where ev’ry god did seem to set his seal,

“To give the world assurance of a man.”

SHAKSPEARE.

In such a country, says a French writer, I found statesmen, in another soldiers; but in England I found *men*.

In our language epitaphs are not necessarily in rhyme, though the language is generally poetical, or very near it. Some of the best, at least the most appropriate, are in this kind of poetical prose.

The fulsome panegyric with which epitaphs too commonly abound, is happily ridiculed in the following, by Mr Pope—

“To the Memory

OF

SIGNIOR FIDO,

An *Italian* of good Extraction:

Who came into *England*,

Not to bite us, like most of his Countrymen,

But to gain an honest Livelihood.

He hunted not after Fame,
 Yet acquir'd it ;
 Regardless of the Praise of his Friends,
 But most sensible of their Love.
 Tho' he liv'd amongst the Great,
 He neither learnt nor flatter'd any Vice.
 He was no Bigot,
 Though he doubted of none of the 39 Articles.
 And, if to follow Nature,
 And to respect the Laws of Society,
 Be Philosophy,
 He was a perfect Philosopher ;
 A faithful Friend,
 An agreeable Companion,
 A loving Husband,
 Distinguished by a numerous Offspring,
 All which he lived to see take good Courses.
 In his old Age he retired
 To the House of a Clergyman in the Country,
 Where he finished his earthly Race,
 And died an Honour and an Example to the whole Species.
 Reader,
 This Stone is guiltless of Flattery,
 For he to whom it is inscribed
 Was not a MAN,
 But a
 GREY-HOUND."

III. The SONNET is entirely a modern invention ; it is borrowed both in its nature and

form from the Italian : it means a little song. The original form was fourteen lines, and this is still preserved in what are esteemed true sonnets ; but many short poems in different forms are now called sonnets. Indeed the artificial form of the original sonnet is by no means suited to the genius of our language. The frequent recurrence of the same rhyme fatigues the ear, while it comes also in an unexpected and unusual manner, so as to disappoint the reader who is accustomed to more perfect harmony.

IV. PASTORAL poetry is of very antient date. Bishop Lowth, in his Lectures on Sacred Poetry, proves that the pastoral taste was diffused among all the poetry of the Hebrews ; and I think Michaelis styles it botanical poetry, so prevalent in it are the ideas attached to rural life. Pastorals are in different forms : sometimes in that of a simple ballad, or popular song, which is indeed the most natural, easy, and pleasant. Those of the Greeks and Romans were, however, mostly in heroic measure, and in dialogue. Theocritus called his pastorals *Idyllia* ; and I think from *εἶδος*, a form or representation, or as we would say in English, a “ Picture of Rural Life.” Virgil adopts

the general title *Bucolics*, for his songs of the herdsmen, and singly he terms them *Eclogues*, that is, *select* poems.

The pastoral may embrace any subject of rural life—A shepherd lamenting the loss of his mistress ; a contest between rural swains ; a moral lesson ; and some writers have even elevated the eclogue to the sublimest subjects, as Mr. Pope in his *Messiah*, which is a happy imitation of Virgil's *Pollio*. English wit has even given us a specimen of the burlesque *Idyllium*, of which we have most pleasant specimens in Mr. Gay's pastorals, and in some more recent publications.

Thus embracing so wide a range of subject, scarcely any rules or principles can be established for the eclogue. The quality which most critics have agreed in recommending is simplicity. Theocritus adopted the Doric dialect, which being the rustic dialect of Greece, is regarded as a recommendation of his *Idylliums*. I am apprehensive, however, that if an English writer of pastorals was to reduce his language to the level of husbandmen or rustics, he must entirely depart from the poetic dialect, and consequently all the charm would be lost.

It must indeed be confessed that modern pastorals composed on the antient plan are exceedingly uninteresting ; and they can only be supported by fine and lively description, or rather should be considered as the vehicle of it.

Theocritus lived at a period when mankind had scarcely emerged from the pastoral state (almost 300 years before Christ), and in a country, Sicily, which existed by rural occupations. Every thing therefore conduced to give popularity to his productions, as adapted to the times in which they were composed. Virgil, and the modern writers of pastoral, were altogether differently situated. They described scenes which no longer existed, and which consequently wanted that interest which the first readers of Theocritus experienced. Indeed they became mere imitators of him. This is notoriously the case with Virgil, except in his first eclogue, which being founded on an incident in his own life, contains all the force and beauty of an original composition from the hand of so great a master.

The pastorals of Theocritus then, are chiefly valuable as exhibiting a picture of the remote

age in which the poet lived. Those of Virgil (except the first and the fourth), are chiefly estimated for some fine passages which they contain. The modern pastorals (strictly so called) as they present no pictures at all analogous to modern life or manners, and are mere imitations of Theocritus and Virgil, excite but little interest. Few at present, I believe, read the pastorals of Spencer or of Phillips, and even the charm of Mr. Pope's versification would scarcely now afford popularity to his pastorals, were they not supported by the excellence of his more mature productions.

That I may not however dismiss the subject without something of example, I shall select a few passages from Virgil's 3d Eclogue, and to afford a specimen at the same time, of the burlesque pastoral, I shall shew in what manner they have been imitated, or rather travestied by Mr. Gay. The subject is a poetical contest between two shepherds—

VIRGIL.

“ Quis fuit alter

“ Descripsit radio totum qui gentibus orbem ?

“ Tempora quæ messor, quæ curvus arator haberet ?”

GAY.

" From Cloddipole we learnt to read the skies,
 " To know when hail will fall, or winds arise.
 " He taught us erst the heifer's tail to view,
 " When stuck aloft, that show'rs would straight ensue:
 " He first that useful secret could explain,
 " That pricking corns foretold the gath'ring rain.
 " When swallows fleet soar high and sport in air,
 " He told us that the welkin would be clear."

VIRGIL.

Dam.—" Vis ergo inter nos, quid possit uterque vicissim
 " Experiamur? Ego hanc vitulam, ne forte recuses,
 " Depono."

Men.—" Id quod multo tute ipse fatebere majus,
 " Insanire libet, quoniam tibi pocula ponam
 " Fagina," &c.

GAY.

Euddy.—" I'll wager this same oaken staff with thee,
 " That Cloddipole shall give the prize to me."

Lobbin Clout.—" See this tobacco pouch, that's lin'd with
 hair,
 " Made of the skin of sleekest fallow deer:
 " This pouch, that's ty'd with tape of reddest hue,
 " I'll wager that the prize shall be my due."

VIRGIL.

Dam.—" Triste lupus stabulis, maturis frugibus imbres,
 " Arboribus venti: nobis Amaryllidis iræ."

Men.—"Dulce satis humor, depulsis arbutus hædis,
 "Lenta salix fæto pecori : mihi solus Amyntas."

GAY.

Lobbin Clout.—"Leek to the Welch, to Dutchmen butter's dear,
 "Of Irish swains potatoes are the cheer;
 "Oats for their feasts the Scottish shepherds grind,
 "Sweet turnips are the food of Blouzelind:
 "While she loves turnips, butter I'll despise,
 "Nor leeks, nor oatmeal, nor potatoes prize."

Cuddy.—"In good roast-beef my landlord sticks his knife,
 "A capon fat delights his dainty wife;
 "Pudding our parson eats, the squire loves hare,
 "But white-pot thick is my Buxoma's fare.
 "While she loves white-pot, capon ne'er shall be,
 "Nor hare, nor beef, nor pudding, food for me."

VIRGIL.

Pal.—"Non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites:
 "Et vitula tu dignus & hic : & quisquis amores
 "Aut metuet dulces, aut experitur amaros,
 "Claudite jam rivos, pueri, sat prata biberunt."

GAY.

Cloddipole.—"Forbear, contending louts, give o'er your strains;
 "An oaken staff each merits for his pains.
 "But see the sun-beams bright to labour warn,
 "And gild the thatch of goodman Hodges' barn."

“ Your herds for want of water stand a-dry ;
“ They’re weary of your songs—and so am I.”

The ballad is the sweetest and most natural medium in which pastoral ideas can at present be conveyed. Perhaps the charming *Idyllium* of Bion, on the death of Adonis, may not improperly fall under this description. If it does not, I know not under what class to rank it ; but this I know, that a more beautiful poem does not exist, either for pathetic expression or simplicity of thought : and therefore not to have noticed it would have been unpardonable. We have many beautiful compositions of this kind in our language. Gay, Cunningham, Rowe, and Shenstone have all left specimens of the pastoral ballad, but that of Mr. Shenstone, in four parts, is generally esteemed the best. It is all beautiful, and I may select at random ; the following lines are from that portion which the author entitles *Hope*—

“ One would think she might like to retire
“ To the bow’r I have labour’d to rear ;
“ Not a shrub that I heard her admire,
“ But I hasted and planted it there.

- “ O how sudden the jessamine strove
“ With the lilac, to render it gay !
“ Already it calls for my love,
“ To prune the wild branches away.
“ From the plains, from the woodlands and groves,
“ What strains of wild melody flow !
“ How the nightingales warble their loves
“ From thickets of roses that blow !
“ And when her bright form shall appear,
“ Each bird shall harmoniously join
“ In a concert so soft and so clear,
“ As—she may not be fond to resign.”

The chief difficulty I have intimated in pastoral, consists in finding such subjects and materials as may render them interesting. With this view, some modern poets have formed them into a kind of dramatic performance, and this may be considered as the highest improvement of pastoral poetry. Of this kind is the *Aminta* of Tasso ; it abounds in tenderness, but has also too much of the Italian refinement and quaintness.

Guarini's *Pastor Fido* is a drama of the same kind, and is by some more admired than the *Aminta* ; but, in my opinion, they are both greatly surpassed by the production of a Scot-

tish bard ; I allude to Allen Ramsey's Gentle Shepherd. It may want the dignity of the Arcadian scene, but there are in it descriptions and sentiments which would do honour to any poet. The Scottish dialect, in which it is written, gives it all the advantage of the Doric numbers, which was the original language of pastoral. It has besides interest and pathos ; the plot is good, the characters well drawn, and the whole drama is conducted with singular address and effect.

LETTER XXVII.

Didactic, Satiric, and Descriptive Poetry.—
Hesiod.—*Lucretius.*—*Virgil.*—*Horace.*—
Boileau.—*Pope.*—*Rapin.*—*Mason.*—*Aken-*
side.—*Armstrong.*—*Juvenal.*—*Butler.*—
Young.—*Dryden.*—*Prior.*—*Denham.*—
Jago.—*Goldsmith.*—*Roscoe.*—*Pleasures of*
Memory.

MY DEAR JOHN,

I NOW proceed to my fifth division, and have placed didactic, or as some have called it, preceptive poetry, lower on the scale than descriptive, elegiac, and lyric poetry ; not because it is of less consequence, but because (if I may be indulged in a little harshness of expression) it is less *poetical*. The preceptive muse has indeed been termed pedestrian, while her other sisters are furnished with wings, or mounted on the fabled courser, and thus are feigned to scale the heights of Parnassus, while she continues

to wander at the bottom, or the side. Not that the moral poems of Horace, Juvenal, Pope, and Johnson ; the Georgics of Virgil, or the Essay on Criticism, can be compared, in point of real importance, with the elegies of Tibullus, or the odes even of Gray ; it is as poems only, and not as lessons of instruction, that they are assigned the inferior station.

With respect, however, to the poetical beauties of which a didactic composition may be susceptible, very much will depend upon the nature of the subject. If it relates to rural affairs, there is room for much elegant description ; and if the subject is moral, it will admit of all the embellishments which may be derived from the delineation of the human character and passions.

Didactic poetry embraces a vast scope of subject, for indeed it may be applied to almost any ; but these subjects may in general be classed under three heads : 1st. The Arts ; 2d. Philosophy and science ; and 3. Morals.

Thus on the arts we have Horace, Vida, Boileau, Roscommon, and Pope on poetry and criticism, with some of inferior note ; Du

Fresnoy on the art of painting ; Mason's English Garden ; and in agriculture Hesiod, Virgil, and others.

In philosophy and science, Lucretius ; Armstrong on health ; Akenside's pleasures of imagination.

In morals the didactic poems are innumerable.

To poems of the two first classes, the rules laid down in treating of didactic compositions in prose will generally apply. As the poet's object, however, is in a great measure to please and entertain, it is unnecessary that he should pursue so exact a methodical arrangement as where a work is meant for instruction only. A writer of taste will also select such parts of his subject as are most likely to captivate the fancy and command attention. He may also enliven it not only with splendid figures, but with pleasing episodes, which serve to relieve the attention, and enliven the gravity of precept. Of all these excellencies we have a most striking example in the Georgics of Virgil. But it requires uncommon powers of mind, great extent of knowledge ; and above all, fancy and

taste, to render any poem of this description tolerable.

Before I proceed to the third class, moral poems, I shall briefly notice a few of the principal writers in the two first divisions.

The first didactic poem extant was undoubtedly Hesiod's *Εργων και Ημερων*, "Of Works and Days." I read it attentively in early life, but I believe few will read it a second time for the sake of the poetry; yet there are many more elegant productions which I would rather see destroyed than this. It is a most singular compound, with little regard to method, of moral observations, of economical instructions, and georgical precepts. It affords a truly interesting picture of man's first emergence from a state of barbarism; and you see the shepherd of Helicon first introducing his half-barbarous neighbours into something like the manners of civilized life. I can have no question, from the internal evidence, but that Hesiod preceded Homer; and no man can have a correct idea of the very early state of Greece without reading his poems. Let me now observe (as I shall have no opportunity of noting again his *Theogonia*), I have no hesitation in believing He-

siod, if not altogether, at the least, *almost* the *inventor* of the mythology of the Greeks. He had probably collected some dark hints from tradition of the true theology, and still more probably had some knowledge of the Hebrew writings. From these, in part accommodated to the popular superstitions, he appears to have formed his *Theogonia*. Herodotus positively declares that he and Homer were “the first who gave names to the gods.”

The next didactic poem of any consequence is that of the Roman poet Lucretius, “*De Natura Rerum*.” Philosophy is, however, a subject that accords but ill with poetry; and I can give little commendation either to the reasoning or the numbers of Lucretius. He has however some fine passages. The introduction is beautiful, and particularly the following lines—

“Te, Dea, te fugiunt venti, te nubila cœli,
“Adventumque tuum; tibi suaves dædale tellus
“Summitit flores; tibi rident æquora ponti,
“Pacatumque nitet diffuso lumine cœlum.”

“At thy approach the raging tempests fly;
“Nor clouds nor mists deform the azure sky;
“For thee the earth is deck’d in varying hues,
“And the gay flow’rs refreshing scents diffuse.

“ ‘Through thee each creature feels the genial ray,
“ And the calm’d heavens disclose a brighter day.”

The description of the plague at Athens is a very fine digression, I might say episode, if that phrase might be applied to any part of a didactic poem ; and there are occasionally some fine ideas cloathed in spirited language ; but on the whole Lucretius is a tedious writer, and as the philosophy is good for nothing, few will take the trouble to read him for a few original conceptions and brilliant thoughts poetically expressed. I can say nothing of the *Astronomicon* of Manilius, having never read it.

The incomparable *Georgics* present themselves next in order for our consideration, and they may be regarded as a model for didactic composition. The author was indeed happy in his subject ; for a dissertation on rural employments and affairs affords more scope than any other for beautiful and luxuriant description ; but the fine imagination, and luxuriant and vivid style of Virgil, could give enchantment to almost any subject. The plan is sufficiently regular for the conveying of all necessary instruction, while the poem is every where

enlivened by animated description, splendid allusions, or interesting narrations. I need only mention his description of the perpetual spring in Italy, and of the Scythian winter; of the happiness of a country life; of the prodigies that foretold the death of Cæsar; of the murrain among the cattle; his interesting account of the bees; and the beautiful episode, if I may again borrow this expression from epic poetry, of Orpheus and Eurydice. The whole too is enriched with apt allusions to the fables of antiquity, and adorned with a felicity of expression which Virgil only could give. It is unnecessary to add more upon so popular a work, especially as I know you to be not cursorily acquainted with it.

Horace's Art of Poetry is confessedly of so irregular a fabric, that critics are divided on the point whether it is an essay on poetry in general, or only a criticism on the state of dramatic poetry at that time. To me it has always appeared to consist of detached remarks upon poetry in general, written with the usual ease and spirit of the author, and seems in some measure connected with the Epistle to Augustus. Bishop Hurd's remarks upon this poem,

which made some noise when first published, (probably as from the hand of a bishop) are entirely borrowed from a foreign critic. Though inferior to his moral epistles and satires, the *Ars Poetica* contains many excellent precepts, and very many lively and spirited thoughts.

Vida has imitated Horace with more of regularity, but less of spirit. The poem is, however, not destitute of merit. It has been elegantly translated by Mr. Hampson, a gentleman who has evinced considerable powers on other occasions. The translation is introduced by a most ingenious and handsome dedication to a prelate now alive.

Boileau's *Art of Poetry* is upon a still more regular plan than that of Vida ; and, as far as French versification will admit, is a most excellent poem. Boileau's *Art of Poetry* may be read with great advantage by most young writers, as far as critical rules can come in aid of genius ; there is nothing against which we can with propriety take exception, and I do not know that he has omitted any of the critical precepts of antiquity.

Mr. Pope's *Essay on Criticism* resembles more the *Art of Poetry* of Horace than either of

those last mentioned. It is full of genius, full of pointed and useful reflexions, but deficient in method. In excuse for this, we must properly recur to the nature of the subject. Criticism, as a science, cannot be reduced to rule, at least without applying it to every department of literature. It was therefore the author's design rather to elicit a few principles and precepts for the *moral* conduct of critics, than to establish a system. But in whatever light we may regard it as a scholastic treatise, the *Essay on Criticism* is certainly a *poem*—a poem abounding in beauties, parts of which are continually quoted as authority by every person of taste. If the early age of the writer (twenty years) is considered, it must be accounted an unexampled production. .

Dr. Johnson observes of it—"If he had written nothing else, it would have placed him among the first critics, and the first poets; as it exhibits every excellence that can embellish or dignify a didactic composition." Dr. Johnson adds (in particularizing the beauties of this poem) "That the comparison of a student's progress in the sciences to that of a traveller in the Alps, is perhaps the best that English poetry

can shew." I cordially agree with our great critic in condemning what the poet has urged with respect to the sound being an echo to the sense, as the weakest part of the poem.

Rapin's Poem on Gardening I have never seen. Du Fresnoy's Poem on Painting I have read in the original, and in Dryden's and Mason's translations ; but it has only served to confirm my opinion respecting the great difficulty of making a didactic poem interesting. Mr. Mason's English Garden perhaps will rank most properly as a descriptive poem.

Dr. Akenside, in his Poem on the Pleasures of the Imagination, has attempted to blend philosophy with criticism. It is taken, as you have probably observed, from Mr. Addison's papers in the Spectator on the same subject. It is however but little read at present, and the reason is, that it possesses more the language than the spirit of poetry.

Dr. Armstrong's Essay on Health can scarcely be called a poem. It may be sound doctrine in some instances in a medical point of view ; but if it would pass on an examination at the college of physicians, or at Surgeon's-hall, I am confident it never would at the court of

Parnassus. If the *Economy of Love*, by the same author, may be considered as a didactic poem, it reflects equal disgrace on the poet and the man.

The third class of didactic poems, those on moral subjects, presents an unbounded field for admiration, perhaps for criticism, and includes some of the most engaging and beautiful productions of human genius. It is at an advanced period of society that moral science assumes any thing like a body or a form. Men have long learned to act, before they have learned to think and reason upon human actions and characters. We have therefore scarcely any thing in remote antiquity which deserves the title of a moral poem. The golden verses of Pythagoras (if really his) are only detached maxims, like those of Rochefoucault, but without their point, and deserve only to be hung up with King Charles's golden rules.

When philosophy had made some progress, and men began to mark the causes and motives of human action, and to reason upon character; then the muse of ethics discovered the natural connexion between sentiment and poetry, and found that verse was the most delightful me-

dium through which the praises and the precepts of virtue might be conveyed. In the regions of sentiment no track or limits can be prescribed. Ethic poetry may assume almost any form, either as a formal essay, or a light and familiar epistle. It can rise to the superior heights of Parnassus, for there is no finer scope for human genius than the passions and actions of mankind, nor any subject that can be equally interesting.

If the Proverbs of Solomon, his Ecclesiastes, &c. may be ranked as poetry, of which I think there is satisfactory evidence in Bishop Lowth's Lectures, then we must admit that ethical poetry is of very antient date indeed. But among the heathen writers I do not find that I am warranted in going further back than Horace. With most extensive reading, and, what is better, with an exquisite knowledge of mankind, with an imagination, perhaps inferior only to Shakspeare or Pope, and with that *curiosa felicitas* of language, so justly remarked of him by Petronius, it is not wonderful that Horace should have surpassed all that went before, and most that have followed, in the line of moral poetry. Most of those which he calls satires, and the bulk of his epistles, are admi-

rable moral essays in verse. If I possess any knowledge of human nature, any insight into the principles of human action, I must acknowledge myself indebted for them to the Bible and Horace. The 1st and 2d satire of the first book ; the 2d of the second book ; the 1st, 2d and 6th epistles, are incomparable specimens in this line of composition. Let me indulge in a few quotations from the first epistle, with Mr. Pope's most happy translation, the only man who could translate Horace with sufficient spirit—

“ Ut nox longa, quibus mentitur amica, diesque
“ Lenta videtur opus debentibus: ut piger annus
“ Pupillis, quos dura premit custodia matrum :
“ Sic mihi tarda fluunt ingrata tempora quæ spem
“ Consiliumque morantur agendi graviter id quod
“ Æque pauperibus prodest, locupletibus æque,
“ Æque neglectum pueris, senibusque nocebit.”

“ Long as to him, who works for debt, the day,
“ Long as the night to her, whose love's away,
“ Long as the year's dull circle seems to run,
“ When the brisk minor pants for twenty-one:
“ So slow th' unprofitable moments roll
“ That lock up all the functions of my soul:
“ That keep me from myself; and still delay
“ Life's instant business to a future day;

“ That task, which as we follow or despise,
 “ The eldest is a fool, the youngest wise.
 “ Which done, the poorest can no wants endure;
 “ And which not done, the richest must be poor.’

The following lines, though not so immediately applicable to our subject, and preceding those I have quoted, are a pleasant delineation of character, and shew (among many other proofs), the author’s reading in the moral writings of the philosophers—

“ Quo me cunque rapit tempestas, deferor hospes,
 “ Nunc agilis fio, & mensor civilibus undis,
 “ Virtutis veræ custos, rigidusque satelles;
 “ Nunc in Aristippi furtim præcepta relabor;
 “ Et mihi res, non me rebus, subjungere conor.”

“ But ask not, to what doctors I apply;
 “ Sworn to no master, of no sect am I:
 “ As drives the storm, at any door I knock;
 “ And house with Montague now, and now with Locke;
 “ Sometimes a patriot, active in debate,
 “ Mix with the world, and battle for the state;
 “ Free as young Lyttleton her cause pursue,
 “ Still true to virtue, and as warm as true:
 “ Sometimes with Aristippus and St Paul,
 “ Indulge my candour, and grow all to all:
 “ Back to my native moderation slide,
 “ And win my way by yielding to the tide.”

The following is in a higher strain—

- “ Fervet avaritia, miseroque cupidine pectus?
 “ Sunt verba & voces, quibus hunc lenire dolorem
 “ Possis, & magnam morbi deponere partem.
 “ Laudis amore tumes? sunt certi piacula quæ te
 “ Ter pure lecto poterunt recreare libello.
 “ Invidus, iracundus, iners, vinosus, amator,
 “ Nemo adeo ferus est, ut non mitescere possit,
 “ Si modo culturæ patientem commodet aurem.
 “ Virtus est vitium fugere, & sapientia prima
 “ Stultitia caruisse,” &c.

 “ Say does thy blood rebel, thy bosom move
 “ With wretched av’rice, or as wretched love?
 “ Know, there are words and spells, which can controul
 “ Between the fits this fever of the soul:
 “ Know there are rhymes, which fresh and fresh apply’d,
 “ Will cure the arrant’st puppy of his pride.
 “ Be furious, envious, slothful, mad, or drunk,
 “ Slave to a wife, or vassal to a punk,
 “ A Swiss, a High-Dutch, or a Low-Dutch bear:
 “ All that we ask is but a patient ear.
 “ ’Tis the first virtue vices to abhor;
 “ And the first wisdom to be fool no more,” &c.

“ Hic murus aheneus esto

“ Nil concire sibi, nulla pallescere culpâ.”

- “ True, conscious honour is to feel no sin,
 “ He’s arm’d without that’s innocent within;
 “ Be this thy screen, and this thy wall of brass,” &c.

The satires of Juvenal are improperly called such, for few of them are personal, or of a ludicrous description ; but he perhaps called his moral essays satires, in imitation of Horace. The 10th satire is almost a perfect example of the moral didactic. It is a regular discourse on the folly (or as Dr. Johnson more properly perhaps translates it, the vanity) of human desires. Dr. Johnson's imitation of this satire is (to say the least of it) not inferior to any of those of Mr. Pope. Take the following as examples—

“ Da spatium vitæ, multos da Jupiter annos ?

“ Hoc recto vultu, solum hoc & pallidus optas.

“ Sed quam continuus & quantis longa senectus

“ Plena malis ! Deformem, & tetrum ante omnia vultum.

“ Dissimilemque sui, deformem pro cute pellem,

“ Pendentisque genas, & tules aspice rugas,

“ Quales umbriferos ubi pandit Tabraca saltus

“ In vetula scalpit jam mater simia bucca.

“ Plurima sunt juvenum discrimina, pulchrior ille

“ Hoc atque ille alio : multum hic robustior illo,

“ Una senum facies, cum voce trementia membra,

“ Et jam leve caput, madidique infantia nasi,

“ Frangendus misero gingiva panis inermi.

“ Usque adeo gravis uxori, natisque, sibique,

- “ Ut captatori moveat fastidia Cosso.
“ Non eadem vini atque cibi, torpenti palato,
“ Gaudia,—————Aspice partis
“ Nunc damnum alterius. Nam quæ cantanti voluptas,
“ Sit licet eximius citharædus, sive Seleucus,
“ Et quibus, aurata mos est fulgere lucerna?
“ Quid refert magna sedeat qua parte theatri,
“ Qui vix cornicinos exaudiet, atque tubarum
“ Conventus? Clamore opus est, ut sentiat auris,
“ Quem dicat venisse puer, quot nuntiit horas
“ Præterea minimus gelidi jam corpore sanguis
“ Febre calit sola: circumscilicet agmine facto
“ Morborum omne genus, quorum si nomina quæras,
“ Promptius expediam, quot amaverit Hippia mæchos;
“ Quot Themison ægros autumnus occiderit uno,
“ Percurram citius quot villas possideat nunc,
“ Quæ tondenti gravis juveni mihi barba sonabat,
“ Ille humero, hic lumbis, hic coxa debilis; ambos
“ Perdidit ille oculos, & luscis invidet. Hujus
“ Pallida labra cibum capiunt digitis alienis.
“ Ipse ad conspectum cænæ deducere rictum
“ Suetus, hiat tantum, ceu pullus hirundinis, ad quem
“ Ore volet pleno mater jejuna. Sed omni,
“ Membrorum damno major dementia, quæ nec
“ Nomina servorum, nec vultum agnoscit amici,
“ Cum quo præterita cænavit nocte, nec illos
“ Quos genuit, quos eduxit. Nam codice sævo
“ Hæredes vetat esse suos; bona tota feruntur
“ Ad Plialem. Tantum artificis valet halitus oris,
“ Quod steterat multis in carcere fornicis annis,

" Ut vigeant sensus animi; ducenda tamen sunt
 " Funera patrum, rogos aspiciendus amitæ
 " Conjugis & fratris, plenæque sororibus urnæ
 " Hæc data pæna diu viventibus, ut renovata
 " Semper clade domus multa in luctibus, inque
 " Perpetuo mœrore & nigra veste senescant."

JUV. Sat. x. l. 245.

" Enlarge my life with multitude of days,
 " In health and sickness, thus the suppliant prays;
 " Hides from himself his state, and shuns to know
 " That life protracted—is protracted woe.
 " Time hovers o'er, impatient to destroy,
 " And shuts up all the passages of joy:
 " In vain their gifts the bounteous seasons pour,
 " The fruit autumnal, and the vernal flower;
 " With listless eyes the dotard views the store,
 " He views and wonders that they please no more,
 " Of all the tasteless meats and joyless wines,
 " And luxury with sighs her slave resigns.
 " Approach, ye minstrels, try the soothing strain
 " And yield the tuneful lenitives of pain,
 " No sound, alas! would touch the impervious ear,
 " Though dancing mountains witness Orpheus near.
 " No lute nor lyre his feeble power attend,
 " Nor sweeter music of a virtuous friend;
 " But everlasting dictates crowd his tongue,
 " Perversely grave, or positively wrong.
 " The still returning tale, and ling'ring jest,
 " Perplex the fawning niece and pamper'd guest;

- “ While growing hopes scarce awe the gath’ring snter,
“ And scarce a legacy can bribe to hear ;
“ The watchful guests still hint the last offence,
“ The daughter’s petulance—the son’s expence,
“ Improve his heady rage with treach’rous skill,
“ And mould his passions till they make his will.
“ Unnumber’d maladies his joints invade,
“ Lay siege to life, and press the dire blockade ;
“ But unextinguish’d av’rice still remains,
“ And dreaded losses aggravate his pains ;
“ He turns, with anxious heart and cripp’d hands,
“ His bonds of debts and mortgages of lands ;
“ Or views his coffers with suspicious eyes,
“ Unlocks his gold, and counts it till he dies.
“ But grant the virtues of a temp’rate prime
“ Bless with an age exempt from scorn or crime,
“ An age that melts in unperceiv’d decay,
“ And glides in modest innocence away ;
“ Whose peaceful day benevolence endears,
“ Whose night congratulating conscience cheers,
“ The gen’ral fav’rite as the gen’ral friend,
“ Such age there is, and who would wish its end ?
“ Yet ev’n on this her load misfortune flings,
“ To press the weary minutes’ flagging wings ;
“ New sorrow rises as the day returns,
“ A sister sickens, or a daughter mourns,
“ Now kindred merit fills the sable bier,
“ Now lacerated friendship claims a tear :
“ Year chases year, decay pursues decay,
“ Still drops some joy from with’ring life away ;

" New forms arise, and different views engage,
" Superfluous lags the vet'ran on the stage,
" Till pitying Nature signs the last release,
" And bids afflicted worth retire to peace."

Of these lines it is hard to say which are to be preferred, the original or the imitation. The original has more of satire, the imitation more of dignity. In the following the imitation is so much more concentrated, and on the whole so superior, that I omit transcribing the original—

" The teeming mother, anxious for her race,
" Begs for each birth the fortune of a face ;
" Yet Vane could tell what ills from beauty spring,
" And Sedley curs'd the form that pleas'd a king.
" Ye nymphs of rosy lips and radiant eyes,
" Whom pleasure keeps too busy to be wise ;
" Whom joys with soft varieties invite,
" By day the frolic, and the dance by night ;
" Who frown with vanity, who smile with art,
" And ask the latest fashion of the heart ;
" What care, what rules, your heedless charms shall
 save,
" Each nymph your rival, and each youth your slave ?
" Against your fame, with fondness hate combines,
" The rival batters, and the lover pines.

“ With distant voice neglected virtue calls,
“ Less heard and less, the faint remonstrance falls :
“ Tir’d with contempt she quits the slipp’ry reign,
“ And pride and prudence take her seat in vain ;
“ In crowds at once, where none the pass defend,
“ The harmless freedom and the private friend.
“ The guardians yield by force superior ply’d,
“ By int’rest, prudence ; and by flatt’ry, pride :
“ Now beauty falls betray’d, despis’d, distrest,
“ And hissing infamy proclaims the rest.”

Boileau’s satires in general may be classed among moral poems, for the writer was too courtly to lash individual vice. They are chiefly copied from Horace and Juvenal ; and the remark of Warburton is perfectly true, that “ Mr. Pope called his satires imitations, while the French poet dignified his imitations with the name of satires.”

In our language we have several fine didactic poems of the moral kind ; but none are more celebrated than Mr. Pope’s *Essay on Man*, and his *Moral Essays*. In the former the poet has aimed at being methodical ; but I perfectly agree with Dr. Johnson, that the metaphysics are execrable, while the morality is pure, and

sometimes sublime, the knowledge of human nature it displays profound, and the poetry incomparable.

There is extant a posthumous work of Lord Bolingbroke, purporting to be the substance of several conversations between him and Mr. Pope, the object of which is to prove that the whole matter of the *Essay on Man* was dictated by his lordship, while Mr. Pope was little more than a versifier. To me it appears that the work in question was rather taken from the *Essay on Man* than the *Essay* from it; and neither Lord Bolingbroke nor Mr. Pope was the author of the system on which it is founded; for it is undoubtedly borrowed altogether from King's *Origin of Evil*: a work abundantly ingenious, but fallacious in its principles, and inaccurate in its conclusions.

The best passages in the *Essay on Man* are the delineations of character, and of these there are none finer than the following:

“ Honour and shame from no condition rise;

“ Act well your part, there all the honour lies.

“ Fortune in men has some small difference made, 195

“ One flaunts in rags, one flutters in brocade;

- " The cobbler apron'd, and the parson gown'd,
 " The friar hooded, and the monarch crown'd.
 " ' What differ more (you cry) than crown and cowl?
 " I'll tell you, friend! a wise man and a fool. 200
 " You'll find, if once the monarch acts the monk,
 " Or, cobbler-like, the parson will be drunk,
 " Worth makes the man, and want of it the fellow;
 " The rest is all but leather or prunella. 204
 " Stuck o'er with titles and hung round with strings,
 " That thou mayest be by kings, or whores of kings;
 " Boast the pure blood of an illustrious race,
 " In quiet flow from Lucrece to Lucrece:
 " But by your father's worth if yours you rate,
 " Count me those only who were good and great. 210
 " Go; if your ancient, but ignoble blood,
 " Has crept through scoundrels ever since the flood,
 " Go! and pretend your family is young;
 " Nor own your fathers have been fools so long.
 " What can ennoble sots, or slaves, or cowards? 215
 " Alas! not all the blood of all the HOWARDS.
 " Look next on Greatness; say where Greatness lies?
 " ' Where, but among the heroes and the wise?
 " Heroes are much the same, the point's agreed,
 " From Macedonia's madman to the Swede; 220
 " The whole strange purpose of their lives, to find
 " Or make, an enemy of all mankind!
 " Not one looks backward, onward still he goes;
 " Yet ne'er looks forward further than his nose.
 " No less alike the politic and wise; 225
 " All sly slow things, with circumspective eyes:

- " Men in their loose unguarded hours they take,
 " Not that themselves are wise, but others weak.
 " But grant that those can conquer, these can cheat ;
 " 'Tis phrase absurd to call a villain great : 230
 " Who wickedly is wise, or madly brave,
 " Is but the more a fool, the more a knave.
 " Who noble ends by noble means obtains,
 " Or failing, smiles in exile or in chains,
 " Like good Aurelius let him reign, or bleed 235
 " Like Socrates, that man is great indeed.
 " What's fame ? a fancy'd life in others' breath,
 " A thing beyond us, ev'n before our death.
 " Just what you hear, you have ; and what's unknown
 " The same (my Lord) if Tully's, or your own. 240
 " All that we feel of it begins and ends
 " In the small circle of our foes or friends :
 " To all beside, as much an empty shade,
 " An Eugene living, as a Cæsar dead ;
 " Alike, or when, or where, they shone, or shine, 245
 " Or on the Rubicon, or on the Rhine.
 " A wit's a feather, and a chief a rod ;
 " An honest man's the noblest work of God.
 " Fame but from death a villain's name can save,
 " As justice tears his body from the grave ; 250
 " When what t' oblivion better were resign'd,
 " Is hung on high, to poison half mankind.
 " All fame is foreign, but of true desert ;
 " Plays round the head, but comes not to the heart :
 " One self-approving hour whole years outweighs 255
 " Of stupid starers, and of loud huzzas ;

“ And more true joy Marcellus exil’d feels, -

“ Than Cæsar with a senate at his heels.

“ In parts superior what advantage lies?

“ Tell (for you can) what is it to be wise? 260

“ ’Tis but to know how little can be known;

“ To see all others’ faults, and feel our own:

“ Condemn’d in bus’ness or in arts to drudge,

“ Without a second, or without a judge.

“ Truths would you teach, or save a sinking land? 265

“ All fear, none aid you, and few understand.

“ Painful pre-eminence! yourself to view

“ Above life’s weakness, and its comforts too.

“ Bring then these blessings to a strict account;

“ Make fair deductions; see to what they mount: 270

“ How much of other each is sure to cost;

“ How each for other oft is wholly lost:

“ How inconsistent greater goods with these;

“ How sometimes life is risk’d, and always ease:

“ Think, and if still the things thy envy call, 275

“ Say, wouldst thou be the man to whom they fall?

“ To sigh for ribands if thou art so silly,

“ Mark how they grace Lord Umbra, or Sir Billy.

“ Is yellow dirt the passion of thy life?

“ Look but on Gripus, or on Gripus’ wife. 280

“ If parts allure thee, think how Bacon shin’d,

“ The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind:

“ Or ravish’d with the whistling of a name,

“ See Cromwell, damn’d to everlasting fame!

“ If all, united, thy ambition call, 285

“ From ancient story learn to scorn them all.

“ There, in the rich, the honour’d, fam’d, and great,
“ See the false scale of happiness complete !
“ In hearts of kings, or arms of queens who lay,
“ How happy those to ruin, these betray ! 290
“ Mark by what wretched steps their glory grows,
“ From dirt and sea-weed as proud Venice rose ;
“ In each how guilt and greatness equal ran,
“ And all that rais’d the hero, sunk the man.
“ Now Europe’s laurels on their brows behold, 295
“ But stain’d with blood, or ill exchang’d for gold :
“ Then see them broke with toils, or sunk in ease,
“ Or infamous for plunder’d provinces.
“ Oh wealth ill-fated ! which no act of fame
“ E’er taught to shine, or sanctify’d from shame ! 300
“ What greater bliss attends their close of life ?
“ Some greedy minion, or imperious wife,
“ The trophy’d arches, story’d halls invade,
“ And haunt their slumbers in the pompous shade.
“ Alas ! not dazzled with their noon-tide ray, 305
“ Compute the morn and ev’ning to the day ;
“ The whole amount of that enormous fame,
“ A tale, that blends their glory with their shame !”

The last lines from 285 are exquisite.

In the Moral Essays the story of Sir Balaam is excellent, and incomparably told. The Essay on the Characters of Women is far superior to both Juvenal’s and Boileau’s satires on the same subject ; and that on the Ruling Passion

contains some fine sketches of character ; those of Helluo and Narcissa are unrivalled.

The Night Thoughts of Dr. Young may be fairly classed among the moral didactic poems, and may be cited as an example to how high a degree of sublimity this description of poetry can attain. I have always regarded the opening as sweetly solemn and pathetic—

“ Tir’d nature’s sweet restorer, balmy sleep,
“ He, like the world, his ready visit pays
“ Where fortune smiles ; the wretched he forsakes,
“ Swift on his downy pinions flies from woe,
“ And lights on lids unsullied with a tear.”

How exquisite should we account these lines had we never read those in Shakspear’s Henry IV., Part II. Act 3. Scene 1.

VI. SATIRE. Many of the poems, as I have already shewn, which go under this name, might be classed under didactic and moral poetry ; yet there is a distinction, though the shades are so blended that it is difficult to draw a definite line. I think satire always implies an intermixture of wit and ridicule : for though these qualities are not wholly excluded from didactic poetry, they are indispensable characteristics of satire.

Thus, though Horace preaches, and sublimely, in many of his satires and epistles, in others he is a mere satirist, and cuts with the keenest ridicule—

“ Omne vafer vitium ridenti Flaccus amico
 “ Tangit; & admissus circum præcordia ludit,
 “ Callidus excusso populum suspendere naso.”

PERS. Sat. 1. l. 115.

“ With concealed design,
 “ See crafty Horace his keen verses join;
 “ And with a sly insinuating grace,
 “ Laugh at his friend, and look him in the face;
 “ Could raise a blush where secret vice he found,
 “ And tickle while he gently prob’d the wound.
 “ With seeming innocence the crowd beguil’d,
 “ But made the desp’rate passes when he smil’d.”

DRYDEN.

Juvenal is chiefly satirical, and seldom didactic; and even Young’s *Love of Fame*, though of a grave complexion, is epigrammatic and satirical.

The origin of satire is very obscure. The word, however, seems to be derived from a kind of rustic comedy formerly exhibited in Greece. I presume—

“ When Thespis first sung ballads in a cart.”

“ Carmine qui tragico vilem certavit ob hircum

“ Mox etiam agrestos satiros nudavit: & asper

“ Incolumi gravitate jocum tentavit; eo quod

“ Ille cebris erat, & grata novitate, morandus

“ Spectator.”

DE ARTE POET. v. 220.

“ The tragic bard, who for a worthless prize,

“ Bid naked satyrs in his chorus rise,

“ Though rude his mirth, yet labour'd to maintain

“ The solemn grandeur of the tragic scene.

“ For novelty alone he knew could charm

“ A lawless crowd with wine and feasting warm.”

FRANCIS.

The thing could not be better described; and this, you must perceive, was essentially different from the satire of the Romans, which, as happens, in many other cases, transferred to itself a name to which it had no legitimate title. It is, I presume, on this account that Quintilian lays claim altogether, on the part of his country, to the invention of satire. “*Satira quidem tota nostra est;*” (Inst. l. 1. c. 10.) and Horace, in his 10th Satire, attributes the invention to Ennius, and asserts that it was utterly unknown to the Greeks. The satire in dialogue, however, such as many of both Horace and Juvenal, seems rather to favour the

Greek extraction, though in the hands of the Roman poets, it has, I dare believe, been infinitely improved.

Satires have been divided into two classes ; the jocose and ludicrous, and the serious or declamatory. Indeed it must be obvious that the poem of *Hudibras*, or Swift's verses on his own death, are very different from the satires of Dr. Young. Among the Romans, Horace is cited as an instance of the one, and Juvenal of the other. But in truth satire may assume almost any form. It was composed both by Ennius and Lucilius in a kind of irregular verse, though Horace and Juvenal employ only the hexameter measure. We have seen satire in the form of the mock heroic, the epistle, the tale, the fable ; and even in the lyric verse and form ; as all must recollect who have read the arch productions of the facetious Peter Pindar.

Of English satires the first place must by all be assigned to the *Hudibras* of Butler, a poem which abounds equally in wit and learning, and possesses a greater portion of both than any human production. Butler must have had a memory that retained all he read, and an imagination that, from these unbounded stores,

could produce an allusion whenever it was wanted. Perhaps there never was a long work supported with equal spirit; for though the polemical discussions between the knight and squire may appear tedious to us at a period so remote from the date of the poem, yet they are equally witty with the more lively parts which depict the character and actions of the hero, and afford a most admirable picture of the absurd controversies of the times. What an admirable episode is that of Sidrophel, and where can a scene be found so witty and so comic as the dialogue between the knight and the lawyer? The outline of *Hudibras* is undoubtedly taken from *Don Quixote*, but it is a very bare outline, or rather a hint; for both the subject, and the manner of treating it, are essentially different.

Mr. Prior's *Alma* may be classed among the *Hudibrastic* satires; at least it has the same measure. Most of the satirical pieces of Swift are in what is called *Hudibrastic* verse, for this extraordinary poem has even given a name to one of our English measures, the eight syllable verse, with occasionally the double rhymes. Of Swift's satirical pieces in verse, the poem on

his own death is by far the best. The Legion Club might more properly rank in the second class, as, though satirical, it is of a serious cast; but the mind of the incomparable writer was evidently on the decline when it was composed.

Boileau's *Lutrin*, Garth's *Dispensary*, Dryden's *M'Flecnoc*, and Mr. Pope's *Dunciad*, the hint of which is taken from the *M'Flecnoc*, but which is as much superior as every thing of Pope is to every thing of Dryden, may be classed among the serious satires. In all of these, however, there is something of a plot or story, in which they (as well as *Hudibras*) differ from the specimens we have of the Roman satire. Dr. Young's *Love of Fame* is also methodical, though methodical in a didactic sense. The satires of Horace, Juvenal and Perseus are more desultory, and miscellaneous, though Juvenal has in general more of method than Horace. I cannot give you better specimens of this description of satiric poetry than the following extracts from the 3d Satire of Juvenal, as imitated by Dr. Johnson—

“ Tho' grief and fondness in my breast rebel,
“ When injur'd Thales bids the town farewell,

“ Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,
“ I praise the hermit, but regret the friend,
“ Who now resolves, from vice and London far,
“ To breathe in distant fields a purer air,
“ And, fix’d on Cambria’s solitary shore,
“ Give to St. David one true Briton more.

“ For who would leave, unbrib’d, Hibernia’s land,
“ Or change the rocks of Scotland for the Strand?
“ There none are swept by sudden fate away,
“ But all, whom hunger spares, with age decay:
“ Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,
“ And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
“ Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
“ And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
“ Here falling houses thunder on your head,
“ And here a female atheist talks you dead.

“ While Thales waits the wherry that contains
“ Of dissipated wealth the small remains,
“ On Thames’s banks, in silent thought we stood,
“ Where Greenwich smiles upon the silver flood:
“ Struck with the seat that gave * Eliza birth,
“ We kneel, and kiss the consecrated earth;
“ In pleasing dreams the blissful age renew,
“ And call Britannia’s glories back to view;
“ Behold her cross triumphant on the main,
“ The guard of commerce, and the dread of Spain,
“ Ere masquerades debauch’d, excise oppress’d,
“ Or English honour grew a standing jest.

* Queen Elizabeth, born at Greenwich.

“ A transient calm the happy scenes bestow,
“ And for a moment lull the sense of woe.
“ At length, awaking with contemptuous frown,
“ Indignant Thales eyes the neighb’ring town.”

“ Let —— live here, for —— has learn’d to live.
“ Here let those reign, whom pensions can incite
“ To vote a patriot black, a courtier white ;
“ Explain their country’s dear-bought rights away,
“ And plead for pirates in the face of day ;
“ With slavish tenets taint our poison’d youth,
“ And lend a lie the confidence of truth.

“ Let such raise palaces, and manors buy,
“ Collect a tax, or farm a lottery,
“ With warbling eunuchs fill a licens’d stage,
“ And lull to servitude a thoughtless age.”

“ But what, my friend, what hopes remain for me,
“ Who start at theft, and blush at perjury ?
“ Who scarce forbear, tho’ Britain’s court he sing,
“ To pluck a titled poet’s borrow’d wing ;
“ A statesman’s logic unconvinc’d can hear,
“ And dare to slumber o’er the Gazetteer ;
“ Despise a fool in half his pension drest,
“ And strive in vain to laugh at H——y’s jest.

“ Others with softer smiles, and subtler art,
“ Can sap the principles, or taint the heart ;
“ With more address a lover’s note convey,
“ Or bribe a virgin’s innocence away.
“ Well may they rise, while I, whose rustic tongue
“ Ne’er knew to puzzle right, or varnish wrong,

“ Spurn’d as a beggar, dreaded as a spy,
“ Live unregarded, unlamented die.”

“ The cheated nation’s happy fav’rites see !
“ Mark whom the great caress, who frown on me !
“ London ! the needy villain’s general home,
“ The common-sewer of Paris and of Rome ;
“ With eager thirst, by folly or by fate,
“ Sucks in the dregs of each corrupted state.
“ Forgive my transports on a theme like this,
“ I cannot bear a French metropolis.”

“ By numbers here from shame or censure free,
“ All crimes are safe, but hated poverty.
“ This, only this, the rigid law pursues,
“ This, only this, provokes the snarling muse.
“ The sober trader at a tatter’d cloak,
“ Wakes from his dream, and labours for a joke ;
“ With brisker air the silken courtiers gaze,
“ And turn the varied taunt a thousand ways.
“ Of all the griefs that harass the distress’d,
“ Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest :
“ Fate never wounds more deep the gen’rous heart,
“ Than when a blockhead’s insult points the dart.
“ Has heav’n reserv’d, in pity to the poor,
“ No pathless waste, or undiscover’d shore ?
“ No secret island on the boundless main ?
“ No peaceful desert yet unclaim’d by Spain ?
“ Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,
“ And bear oppression’s insolence no more.”

“ Prepare for death, if here at night you roam,
“ And sign your will before you sup from home.

“ Some fiery fop, with new commission vain,
“ Who sleeps on brambles till he kills his man ;
“ Some frolic drunkard, reeling from a feast,
“ Provokes a broil, and stabs you for a jest.

“ Yet ev’n these heroes, mischievously gay,
“ Lords of the street, and terrors of the way ;
“ Flush’d as they are with folly, youth, and wine,
“ Their prudent insults to the poor confine ;
“ Afar they mark the flambeau’s bright approach,
“ And shun the shining train, and golden coach.”

“ A single jail, in Alfred’s golden reign,
“ Could half the nation’s criminals contain ;
“ Fair justice then, without constraint ador’d,
“ Held high the steady scale, but deep’d the sword ;
“ No spies were paid, no special juries known,
“ Blest age ! but ah ! how diff’rent from our own !

“ Much could I add—but see the boat at hand,
“ The tide retiring calls me from the land :
“ Farewell ;—When youth, and health, and fortune
 spent,

“ Thou fly’st for refuge to the wilds of Kent ;
“ And tir’d, like me, with follies and with crimes,
“ In angry numbers warn’st succeeding times ;
“ Then shall thy friend, nor thou refuse his aid,
“ Still foe to vice, forsake his Cambrian shade ;
“ In virtue’s cause once more exert his rage
“ Thy satire point, and animate thy page.”

Of this kind of satire the most perfect specimens in our language are Mr. Pope's prologue and epilogue to his satires. The first, the Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, is evidently, as Dr. Johnson observes, made up of scraps, (but they are choice ones) connected together as loosely as many of Horace's. To particularize the excellent touches of satire which this poem contains, would be almost to transcribe the whole. Dr. Johnson remarks, that the weakest part is the lines on Sporus. The epilogue, which consists of two dialogues, is more regular, but has hardly equal spirit. Both are, however, in the true style of Horace.

- VII. Descriptive poetry embraces a very ample scope. Description, indeed, enters into all poetry, whether heroic, didactic, or pastoral, and, under proper restraints, is the soul of all poetry whatever; but there are some forms with which it particularly consorts, such as elegy and lyric. I am, however, at present to treat of poems professedly descriptive, which definition excludes all those that can be arranged under any of the other classes.

Descriptive poetry may be classed under two divisions—That which offers to our view a de-

lineation of nature, or of natural scenery; and that which describes the manners, sentiments, and characters of men. That the first kind has little in itself engaging is evident, since all descriptive poets are obliged to bring sentiment to their aid to enliven what would otherwise infallibly tire; and since it is a rule universally established among critics, that descriptions should be short. Man is a creature that is always looking to himself, and when a writer wanders far from this favourite theme, he will be little read. Of particular scenes I aver it is impossible in words to draw a picture by which they can be known. Yet general description, in the hands of a master, has its charms, particularly when combined with what interests the human heart.

The ancients seem to have had no poems which could be exclusively termed descriptive. Those of Moschus, Bion, and the other minor poets of Greece, which might be forced into this class, are called *Idylliums*, and have generally some other subject for a ground-work. The moderns have excelled in this department. For though it is extremely difficult to make a merely descriptive poem interesting, the diffi-

culty of the achievement is a high commendation to the poet who succeeds. Of those poems which describe natural scenery, Denham's Cooper's Hill, Pope's Windsor Forest, and Roscoe's Mount Pleasant, are the best. I add the latter, though it is not so much known as it deserves; but the name of the author has been justly celebrated since its publication, and it is, in my opinion, inferior to neither of the others. Cooper's Hill Dr. Johnson regards as an original work, and calls Denham "the father of a species of composition that may be denominated *local poetry*." Yet the very limited popularity of this poem at present is an argument against this species of poetry; and I believe Pope's "Windsor Forest" (notwithstanding his magic wand, which turned almost every thing to gold, and the *curiosa felicitas*, in which he was not exceeded by Horace) is less read than any of his poems, the "Temple of Fame" excepted, which may also be regarded in some measure as a descriptive poem.

Mr. Roscoe's "Mount Pleasant" was written at a very early age, and ought not therefore to be subjected to all the severities of criticism. As it is less known than the others, I shall se-

lect a few specimens from it, which I think will not have a tendency to lessen the author's well-earned reputation. If I might add a tribute of early friendship to this truly amiable man, I would do it in the words of Perseus—

“ Tecum etenim longos memini consumere soles,
“ Et tecum primas epulis decerpere noctes,” &c.

“ Long summer days thy precepts I rehearse ;
“ And winter nights were short in thy converse.”

DRYDEN.

The introduction is beautiful, but I have not room for all the beauties of this poem. I shall therefore at present only claim your attention to the author's account of the rise of commerce in the local prospect that lay before him—

“ Far as the eye can trace the prospect round,
“ The splendid tracks of opulence are found:
“ Yet scarce an hundred annual rounds have run,
“ Since first the fabric of this power begun ;
“ His noble waves inglorious, Mersey roll'd,
“ Nor felt those waves by labouring art controul'd ;
“ Along his side a few small cots, were spread,
“ His finny brood their humble tenants fed ;
“ At opening dawn with fraudulent nets supply'd,
“ The paddling skiff would brave his spacious tide,

“ Ply round the shores, nor tempt the dangerous main,
“ But seek ere night the friendly port again.
“ Now o’er the wondering world her name resounds,
“ From northern climes, to India’s distant bounds.
“ —Where-e’er his shores the broad Atlantic laves ;
“ Where-e’er the Baltic rolls his wintry waves ;
“ Where-e’er the honour’d flood extends his tide,
“ That clasps Sicilia like a favour’d bride ;
“ Whose waves in ages past so oft have bore
“ The storm of battle on the Punic shore ;
“ Have wash’d the banks of Greece’s learned bow’rs,
“ And view’d at distance Rome’s imperial tow’rs ;
“ In every clime her prosperous fleets are known,
“ She makes the wealth of every clime her own.”

The history of commercæ is connected with the preceding subject.

“ When commerce, yet an infant, rais’d her head,
“ ’Twas mutual want her growing empire spread :
“ Those mutual wants a distant realm supply’d,
“ And like advantage every clime enjoy’d.
“ Distrustless then of every treacherous view,
“ An open welcome met the stranger crew ;
“ And whilst the whitening fleet approach’d to land,
“ The wondering natives hail’d them from the strand ;
“ Fearless to meet, amidst the flow of soul,
“ The lurking dagger, or the poison’d bowl.
“ Now, more destructive than a blighting storm,
“ A bloated monster, Commerce, rears her form ;

“ Throws the meek olive from her daring hand,
“ Grasps the red sword, and whirls the flaming brand:
“ True to no faith ; by no restraints controul’d ;
“ By guilt made cautious, and by avarice bold.
“ Each feature reddens with the tinge of shame,
“ Whilst Patna’s plain, and Buxar’s fields I name.”

A more pleasing subject, the charitable institutions of Liverpool and its vicinity, is perhaps still more pleasingly illustrated—

“ Sweep the light strings, and louder swell the lyre !
“ Far nobler themes a nobler song require.—
“ The heav’n born virtues come,—a lovely train ;
“ They prompt the verse,—be theirs the votive strain.
“ —Not those that seek in lonely shades to dwell,
“ The selfish inmates of the hermit’s cell ;
“ Like his pale lamp, a partial light supply,
“ Unblest to live, and unregarded die ;
“ But those design’d to sooth the labouring breast,
“ Protect the weak, and give the weary rest ;
“ Assuage the rigors of corporeal pain ;
“ Supply the poor, and loose the prisoner’s chain :
“ And like the radiance of the solar ray,
“ On all around to pour impartial day.
“ —Known by the wat’ry lustre of her eye,
“ Her sorrowing smile, and sympathizing sigh ;
“ See ! tender Pity comes ;—at her controul,
“ Drops the big tear, and melts the stubborn soul ;

“ So the rude rock by power divine impell’d,
 “ Gush’d forth in streams, and cheer’d the thirsty field.
 “ —Next Charity,—by no proud pageants known,
 “ Nor crown, nor sweeping train, nor azure zone.
 “ —If chance remembrance wakes the generous deed,
 “ No pride elates her, and she claims no meed;
 “ And timorous ever of the vulgar gaze,
 “ She loves the action, but disclaims the praise.’
 “ —Yet not of Virtue’s open cause afraid,
 “ Where public blessings ask her public aid,
 “ She shines superior to the wretch’s sneer,
 “ And bold in conscious honour, knows no fear.
 “ Hence rose yon pile, where sickness finds relief,
 “ Where lenient care allays the weight of grief;*
 “ —Yon spacious roof, where hush’d in calm repose,
 “ The drooping widow half forgets her woes:†
 “ —Yon calm retreat, where screen’d from every ill,
 “ The helpless orphan’s throbbing heart lies still;‡
 “ And finds delighted, in the peaceful dome,
 “ A better parent, and a happier home.”

There are, besides, Dyer’s Grongar Hill, Jago’s Edge Hill, Mr. M’Neil’s Carse of Stirling, and many other poems of this kind in our language, of considerable merit.

Perhaps the Fleece of Dyer, Phillips’s Cyder,

* The public Infirmary.

† The Alms-houses adjoining the Infirmary.

‡ The Blue-coat Hospital.

and Somerville's Chace, may come under this description. They are now little read ; but for minuter observations on Denham, Phillips and Dyer, I must refer you to the first of critics, Dr. Johnson.

Thomson's Seasons may be considered as of a mixed character, since they contain at least as much sentiment as description ; but that remark will perhaps apply to most of those I have mentioned. After Dr. Johnson's admirable criticism on the Seasons, I feel incapable of saying a single word. That critic remarks that " His mode of thinking and of expressing his thoughts is original : his blank verse is no more the verse of Milton, or of any other poet, than the rhymes of Prior are the rhymes of Cowley." " The reader (he adds) of the Seasons wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shews him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses." The same author judiciously observes that " the great defect of the Seasons is the want of method ;" and that " his diction is sometimes too exuberant, and may sometimes be charged with filling the ear more than the mind."

From such poems as these the gradation is

easy to those which are chiefly descriptive of sentiment. In this line there is scarcely any thing that can bear competition with the "Traveller" and "Deserted Village" of Dr. Goldsmith. With these you are well acquainted, and I have already sufficiently indulged in quotations from them. "The "Deserted Village" is a more interesting and finished poem than the "Traveller." There is little of method in either; but probably by an attention to method they would have been spoiled.

There are many other excellent poems which may be classed under the sentimental descriptive, among which I shall only mention Mr. Rogers' Pleasures of Memory, and Mr. Campbell's Pleasures of Hope. There are some excellent short pieces of this kind also in my friend Mr. M'Neil's collection of Poems.

As I have already indulged in paying one tribute to early friendship, let me present you with a short extract from a poem which, excellent as it is, still is not more estimable than its author—

"The beauteous maid, that bids the world adieu,
" Oft of that world will snatch a fond review;

“ Oft at the shrine neglect her beads, to trace
“ Some social scene, some dear familiar face ;
“ Forgot, when first a father’s stern controul
“ Chas’d the gay visions of her opening soul :
“ And ere, with iron tongue, the vesper-bell
“ Bursts thro’ the cypress-walk, the convent-cell,
“ Oft will her warm and wayward heart revive,
“ To love and joy still tremblingly alive ;
“ The whisper’d vow, the chaste caress prolong,
“ Weave the light dance, and swell the chōral song ;
“ With wrapt ear drink th’ enchanting serenade ;
“ And, as it melts along the moonlight glade,
“ To each soft note return as soft a sigh,
“ And bless the youth that bids her slumbers fly.”

LETTER XXVIII.

Elegy.—*Lyric Poetry.*—*Epistles.*—*Tales and Fables.*—*Ovid.*—*Tibullus.*—*Propertius.*—*Pope.*—*Collins.*—*Gray.*—*Pindar.*—*Horace.*—*Milton.*—*Dryden.*—*Anacreon.*—*Cowley.*—*Songs and Ballads.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

ELEGY, as a poetical composition, rises still higher in the scale than didactic, and even than descriptive poetry. It indeed approaches to the lyric, which is, if I may so express myself, the most poetical of all poetry. The language of elegy ought to be nearly as much abstracted from that of common life as the language of the ode, whereas both didactic and descriptive poetry often condescend to familiar topics, and those expressed in language very little above that of polished prose or conversation. Elegy also admits of nearly as much figure as lyric poetry itself. Indeed figurative language, and fine and interesting allusions, though with less

boldness than lyric poetry admits of, are the soul, and almost the characteristic of elegy.

I can have no doubt in deriving the word elegy from the Greek *Ελεος* (pity), and in confirmation of this we find that it has been appropriated, by the poets of all ages, to pathetic subjects. It was first employed in lamentation for the decease of great persons, or those who were particularly dear to the writer; it was afterwards extended to express the misery of disappointed love, and has sometimes been made the vehicle of moral sentiment.

From these circumstances every thing in thought or diction which consists with what is solemn or pathetic, is admissible in elegy; but conceit, witticism, or point, is wholly inconsistent with it. It should be soft, tender, and plaintive; to these characteristics the Latin verse of hexameter and pentameter, and our alternate verse of ten syllables are admirably adapted. The former was by the Latins emphatically called elegiac verse, and from its sweetness, was adopted in many compositions not strictly elegiac, such as Ovid's epistles; while, on the contrary, we have many real elegies which are not in that measure which we call elegiac.

The origin of elegy is undoubtedly remote. Bishop Lowth, in his Lectures on Sacred Poetry, asserts that it was a common form of composition among the Hebrews, and instances the pathetic lamentation on the death of Saul, and many of the Psalms which were written during the Babylonish captivity, particularly the 42d. You will find in my translation of the Lectures an humble attempt to translate both the Lamentation for Saul, and the Psalms in question, into English elegiac measure. Callimachus and Philetas, among the Greeks, are celebrated as elegiac writers. Horace professes himself to be in doubt with respect to the inventor of elegiac poetry—

“ Quis tamen exiguos elegos emisit auctor,

“ Grammatici certant; & adhuc sub iudice lis est.”

DE ART. POET. v. 77.

“ By whom invented critics still contend,

“ And of their vain disputings find no end.”

FRANCIS.

Among the Latins, however, we find no elegiac writers of any note before Ovid, Tibullus, and Propertius, who were all contemporaries, and are the best writers extant in this peculiar

line. The *Tristia* of Ovid, I think, affords the happiest specimens of elegiac poetry.

Our English writers of elegy have not confined themselves, like the Latins, to a particular measure, though latterly the term elegiac has been appropriated to the stanza of ten syllable verse, with alternate rhymes. Thus Mr. Pope's *Elegy on the Death of an unfortunate young Lady*, is truly such, though it is in the heroic measure. Though Dr. Johnson admits that it "is written in some parts with vigorous animation, and in others with gentle tenderness," yet I will confess to you, that neither the feelings nor the expression of the poet ever seemed to me adequate to the occasion. Perhaps it was written at that season when the powers of the understanding and imagination were torpified by sorrow, I might say by horror; perhaps it was not possible, so intimately concerned as he was (the remote cause of the death she voluntarily incurred) to express his feelings; perhaps the obscurity in which from delicacy he was compelled to veil the story, reduced him to the necessity of employing general terms, and avoiding that minuteness of de-

lineation which is the life of poetry. The theme, however, appears not to have deserted his thoughts, and it is not unfair to presume that the similitude of the case might direct his attention to the composition of that first of poems, the *Eloisa*. There, upon a subject sufficiently remote, yet sufficiently resembling, he pours forth his genuine feelings, and the concluding lines incontestibly allude to the transaction in question.

There is a poem of Collins on the Death of Thomson, which, though not exactly in the measure which we have appropriated to this description of poem, bears all the true characteristics of elegy—softness, sweetness, melancholy, and harmony. I have always admired beyond any thing of the kind the following stanzas—

- “ Remembrance oft shall haunt the shore,
- “ When Thames in summer wreaths is drest ;
- “ And oft suspend the dashing oar,
- “ To bid thy gentle spirit rest.”
- “ And oft as ease and health retire
- “ To breezy lawn, or forest deep,
- “ The friend shall view yon whitening spire,
- “ And mid the varied landscape weep.”

“ Yet lives there one, whose heedless eye
“ Shall scorn thy pale shrine glimm’ring near !
“ With him, sweet Bard, may Fancy die,
“ And joy desert the blooming year.”

Mr. Gray’s Elegy in a Country Church Yard has deserved all the praises that have been bestowed upon it. Here the muse of elegy has

“ Stoop’d to truth, and moraliz’d her song.”

“ It abounds (says Dr. Johnson) with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.” The best stanzas I think are—

“ Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
“ The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear;
“ Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
“ And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

“ For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey
“ This pleasing anxious being e’er resign’d,
“ Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
“ Nor cast one longing, ling’ring look behind.”

The former of these Mr. Gray has himself imitated, and I think improved in his Installation Ode—

“ Thy lib’ral heart, thy judging eye,
“ The flower unheeded shall descry,
“ And bid it round Heaven’s altars shed
“ The fragrance of its blushing head :
“ Shall raise from earth the latent gem
“ To glitter on the diadem.”

Serene in the first line (notwithstanding the apology of my late friend G. Wakefield), if not quite an expletive, will generally be mistaken for one.

IX. LYRIC poetry may, in point of antiquity, contend with any other species, perhaps with the epic itself. Though we have no knowledge of the metre of the Hebrews, we cannot doubt but they had poetry, and as little (while the sublime book of Psalms is before us) can we doubt that much of that poetry is lyric. Many, if not most of them, we know to a certainty were sung or set to music, which both the term ode, and the epithet lyric (from the lyre, a musical instrument) imply. If we advert to the remote origin of the ode, it will perhaps account at once for the sublimity which is required from the lyric bard, and the irregularity in which he is indulged. All the ideas of men just emerging from the savage state are

wild, awful, enthusiastic, and passionate; and they express themselves concisely, and with abruptness. Such were probably the first models of the ode, from whatever quarter they were derived, and upon these models poets afterwards composed.

There is, however, an evident distinction to be made in lyric compositions. There is the serious and sublime ode; and the familiar and comic, or, in modern language, the song. The first may be regarded as the original ode: it was employed both by the Hebrews and the Pagan nations at solemn festivals in their religious ceremonies; and by the latter in praise of heroes and other distinguished personages. There is no description of poetry that requires both thoughts and language more sublime and more remote from common usage than this. A fine ode is compared by Horace to a majestic torrent from a mountain's top, which overflows it's wonted limits—

“ Monte decurrens velut amnis, imbres

“ Quem super notas aluere ripas

“ Fervet, immensusque ruit profundo

“ Pindarus ore.”——B. iv. O. 2.

“ As when a river swollen by sudden showers
“ O'er its known banks from some steep mountain pours,
“ So in profound, unmeasurable song
“ The deep-mouth'd Pindar, foaming pours along.”

FRANCIS.

Yet with all this seeming irregularity, there is no composition that requires a more artful and judicious arrangement than a perfect ode. It may truly be said of it that the perfection of art is to conceal the art; and I will venture to say more, that to form a good ode, the poet should have the whole plan regularly digested in his mind before he begins to compose. The shorter the poem, the more nice should be the arrangement. It is not necessary that an ode, like an epigram, should conclude in a point; but it is absolutely necessary that it should rise in a kind of climax, and that the strongest part should be towards the conclusion.

For the Hebrew ode, with some of the most perfect specimens which a man of fine taste could select, I must refer to Bishop Lowth's Lectures on Sacred Poetry. In Greek, Pindar has long occupied the highest situation in this department; and from his exceeding popularity among his countrymen and contempo-

raries, the nicest and most fastidious of critics ; from the applause of the best judges in succeeding generations, Horace, Quintilian, Longinus, &c. ; we must not dare to dispute that sentence which has invested him with the first honours as a lyric poet. To us, at this very distant period, the odes of Pindar seem to contain some beautiful poetical expressions ; occasionally some fine, but common-place, moral sentiments ; but the personages whom he celebrates, and the transactions to which he alludes, are gone so far down the stream of oblivion, that the modern reader must feel a want of interest in them. Even the harmony of his numbers, so celebrated by his contemporaries, are impaired by the lapse of time ; and I must confess that some of the short odes in the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides (the best part indeed of these poems) have for me superior charms. The subjects for this kind of ode, as well as those of the opposite description, are the odes of Anacreon defined by Horace—

“ Musa dedit fidibus Divos, puerosque Deorum,
 “ Et pugilem victorem, & equum certamine primum,
 “ Et juvenum curas, & libera vina referre.”

DE ART. POET. v. 33.

“ The muse to nobler subjects tunes her lyre ;
“ Gods, and the sons of gods, her song inspire,
“ Wrestler and steed, who gain’d the Olympic prize ;
“ Love’s pleasing cares, and wine’s unbounded joys.”

FRANCIS.

The Roman lyrist has attempted with success both descriptions of the ode ; but if I feel rightly with respect to an author whom I have from infancy admired almost above every other, Horace excels in a kind of middle style, the polite, the tender, the pleasant, and the moral. The two odes (Lib. III. O. 9. and Lib. IV. O. 3.), of which Scaliger professes that he would rather have been the author than of most of Pindar’s, and rather indeed than to have been king of Arragon, are of this description. The incomparable poem (Lib. III. O. 3.) “ *Justum & Tenacem*,” &c. is not of the highest description of lyric poetry. It is elegant and moral, and the beginning almost sublime. In a word, Horace as a lyric writer is original ; he is neither Anacreon nor Pindar ; his manner is quite his own.

In our own language we have some lyric productions of the highest excellence ; among the first of which I must rank the Allegro and

Penseroso of Milton, though by Dr. Blair, and other critics, they have been most improperly classed among descriptive poems; but they have, in truth, every characteristic of lyric. Like Horace, Milton is indeed original, and imitates neither Pindar nor any other poet. He happily combines sentiment and description. In his *Comus* too, there are some happy specimens of lyric poetry, as well as in *Sampson Agonistes*, each suited to the nature of the drama in which they are found, and perfectly on the Greek model.

Of the two rival odes, Dryden's and Pope's, on St. Cæcilia's day, so much has been written, and some observations so well-written, by our great critic Dr. Johnson, that I may be well excused for declining to enter into the detail, and for referring you at once to his life of Pope. Dryden's is more happily planned, Pope's more carefully executed. Dryden's is a fine and interesting story, well told on the whole, at least well arranged; Pope's is an assemblage of ancient mythology, and of modern observations on the power of music. It has always struck me that there is a good deal of what Mr. Pope called *namby-pamby* in both—

“ With ravish’d ears
“ The monarch hears,
“ Assumes the god,
“ Affects to nod,
“ And seems to shake the spheres.”

“ Rich the treasure,
“ Sweet the pleasure,
“ Sweet is pleasure after pain,” &c.—DRYDEN.

“ Dreadful gleams,
“ Dismal screams,
“ Fires that glow,
“ Shrieks of woe,
“ Sullen moans,
“ Hollow groans,” &c.—POPE.

These lines involuntarily remind me of some of the burlesque poems addressed to Gulliver ; and are greatly below the dignity of a serious ode. The concluding thought in each of these poems is very nearly alike, and in each is too epigrammatical, another capital blemish in a lyric composition.

In truth, though we have no modern specimens of lyric poetry which equal the *Allegro* and *Penseroso* of Milton, we have many that far surpass the efforts of Dryden and Pope. Mr. Gray’s *Bard*, the *Progress of Poetry*, his *Ode on Eton College*, the rich yet simple ef-

fusion to Spring, may be classed among the highest efforts of the lyric muse. The two first Dr. Johnson has criticised with unwarranted asperity ; for after all he has given us little more than verbal criticisms : they are however deserving of your attention. Where even they are not just, they are still ingenious.

The Bard is superior to the other in the plan and arrangement. Attention is caught by the solemn though abrupt opening of the scene, and is still preserved by the interesting nature of the historical prophecy. Notwithstanding Dr. Johnson's arch remark, I have always greatly admired the passage beginning—

“ Ye tow'rs of Julius,” &c.

In the “ Progress of Poetry,” Shakspeare and Milton are finely characterised. I wonder, however, the fastidious critic did not see something like conceit in these two lines—

“ He saw—but blasted with excess of light,

“ Clos'd his eyes in endless night.”

The lyric poetry of Collins is less stately, solemn and sublime, than that of Gray, but it is more easy, natural, sweet, and interesting. Of the fine image in the first stanza of the Ode to Mercy I have already spoken. This, and the

Ode to Fear, that on the Poetical Character, and “The Manners,” an ode, have always appeared to me the most original and interesting, though none of them can be perused by any reader of taste without real pleasure.

We have many other beautiful modern productions of this kind. Some of the Odes in Mr. Mason’s *Caractacus* and *Elfrida*, are very fine, particularly that in the former “to Death.” I may particularly add Mr. Wharton’s Ode to Fancy, Dr. Akenside’s on Lyric Poetry, and the Ode to Superstition, by a living author, already mentioned in a former letter with I hope becoming respect.

The second description of lyric poems includes those on love, conviviality, and all the lighter subjects. The two fragments which we have of Sappho, though love is the subject, are yet in a style as polished and sublime as any production whatever of the lyric muse. Those of Anacreon (though I cannot praise their morality) are fascinating beyond expression, both for the vivacity of the thoughts, and the unrivalled harmony of his verse. Among the most beautiful of his productions I may specify the 3d, the 28th, and the 46th. The Dove and the Swallow are also charming. Cowley is

among the best of his translators ; and, as Cowley is not in every body's hands, I will transcribe a short but spirited ode, embellished, or defaced as you may please to call it, by the luxuriant genius of Cowley—

THE GRASHOPPER.

- “ Happy insect, what can be
- “ In happiness compar'd to thee?
- “ Fed with nourishment divine,
- “ The dewy morning's gentle wine !
- “ Nature waits upon thee still,
- “ And thy verdant cup does fill.
- “ 'Tis fill'd wherever thou dost tread,
- “ Nature self's thy Ganimed.
- “ Thou dost drink, and dance, and sing ;
- “ Happier than the happiest king !
- “ All the fields which thou dost see,
- “ All the plants belong to thee,
- “ All that summer hours produce,
- “ Fertile made with early juice.
- “ Man for thee does sow and plough ;
- “ Farmer he, and landlord thou !
- “ Thou dost innocently joy ;
- “ Nor does thy luxury destroy ;
- “ The shepherd gladly heareth thee,
- “ More harmonious than he.
- “ Thee country hinds with gladness hear,
- “ Prophet of the ripened year !

“ Thee Phœbus loves, and does inspire ;
 “ Phoebus is himself thy sire.
 “ To thee, of all things upon earth,
 “ Life is no longer than thy mirth.
 “ Happy insect, happy thou,
 “ Dost neither age nor winter know.
 “ But when thou’st drunk, and danc’d, and sung
 “ Thy fill, the flow’ry leaves among,
 “ (Voluptuous, and wise with all,
 “ Epicurean animal !)
 “ Sated with thy summer feast,
 “ Thou retir’st to endless rest.”

In this ode

Ολιγην δροσον πεπωκυς,

is beautifully translated—

“ Fed with nourishment divine,
 “ The dewy morning’s gentle wine.”

Ξερεος ηλυκυς προφηϊτης

is almost literally, but excellently given—

“ Prophet of the ripened year.”
 “ Farmer he, and landlord thou,”

is in the peculiarly playful stile of Cowley.

Horace has also many odes of the gay and sprightly kind, of great beauty and excellence ; but in no language whatever are so many to be

found as in our own. With us they have been distinguished from the first by the name of *SONGS*, as most of them have been set and *sung* to music. Dr. Aikin, in an excellent collection which he has made, and which is preceded by a judicious essay on song-writing, has classed them under the following heads: 1st. Ballads and pastoral songs; 2d. Passionate and descriptive songs; 3d. Ingenious and witty songs. To this arrangement I do not mean to object; yet it appears to me that another class might be added—Patriotic and war songs; such as the celebrated Greek odes of Alcæus and Tyrtaeus, which inspired their heroic countrymen with the spirit of liberty and the ardour of patriotism.

The English ballad will scarcely rank under the description of lyric poetry; and I place it here rather because I know not where else to assign it a station, than from any sense of the propriety of the collocation. An elegant poetess of the present time, who was so kind as to write the article Poetry for my Dictionary, has furnished us with the real origin of our ballad.

“In the age of Charlemagne, the minstrels of Provence, or, as they were called, the trouba-

dours, introduced the metrical tales or ballads, which, from the dialect in which they were written, were called also romances. Their poems were all written in rhyme; but whether this practice was borrowed from the Goths or Arabs is uncertain." But though the first ballads might have for their subjects tales, or simple narratives, such as Chevy Chase, the Children in the Wood, &c., yet we find the term was soon extended to various subjects of love or morals. The ballad of "Death and the Lady," which yet occupies a place in the chimney of many a farm-house, is a moral dialogue. Dr. Aikin has therefore, with propriety, classed among the ballads the popular songs of Mr. Gay, which are real lyrics, and of which Black-eyed Susan is perhaps the best. The little songs in our comic operas have as much a claim to the title of lyric as the choruses in the Greek tragedies, and indeed are more naturally introduced, for singing corresponds better with a representation of joy than of sorrow.

Of "Passionate and descriptive songs," the number is very great in our language, as you will see in Dr. Aikin's collection, and yet this does not include the whole. Amidst such an

assemblage of beauties, it is difficult to select ; and if I followed the dictates of my own taste, the mere catalogue would fill a page. I will however mention Thomson's " For ever Fortune," Littleton's " Heavy Hours," Percy's " O Nancy," and the well-known ballad of " Old Darby and Joan," as extremely beautiful.

Our witty songs form a class not less numerous than the preceding. The following is exquisitely witty—

" The women all tell me I'm false to my lass,
" That I quit my dear Chloe, and stick to my glass :
" But to you men of reason, my reasons I'll own ;
" And if you don't like them, why, let them alone.

" Altho' I have left her, the truth I'll declare,
" I believe she was good, and I'm sure she is fair ;
" But goodness and charms in a bumper I see,
" That make it as good and as charming as she.

" My Chloe had dimples and smiles I must own,
" But tho' she could smile, yet in truth she could frown.
" Now tell me, ye lovers of liquor divine,
" Did you e'er see a frown in a bumper of wine ?

" Her lilies and roses were just in their prime,
" Yet lilies and roses are conquer'd by time ;
" But in wine from its age such a benefit flows,
" That we like it the better the older it grows.

“ They tell me my love would in time have been
cloy’d,

“ And that beauty’s insipid when once ’tis enjoy’d ;

“ But in wine I both time and enjoyment defy,

“ For the longer I drink, the more thirsty am I.

“ Let murders, and battles, and history prove

“ The mischiefs that wait upon rivals in love :

“ But in drinking, thank heaven, no rival contends,

“ For the more we love liquor, the more we are friends.

“ She too might have poison’d the joy of my life,

“ With nurses, and babies, and squalling and strife :

“ But my wine neither nurses nor babies can bring,

“ And a big-belly’d bottle’s a mighty good thing.

“ We shorten our days when with love we engage ;

“ It brings on diseases, and hastens old age :

“ But wine from grim death can its votaries save,

“ And keep t’other leg out, when there’s one in the
grave.

“ Perhaps, like her sex, ever false to their word,

“ She had left me—to get an estate, or a lord :

“ But my bumper, regarding nor title, nor pelf,

“ Will stand by me when I can’t stand by myself.

“ Then let my dear Chloe no longer complain ;

“ She’s rid of her lover, and I of my pain ;

“ For in wine, mighty wine, many comforts I spy :

“ Should you doubt what I say,—take a bumper and
try.”

“ When Orpheus went down to the regions

below" is also full of wit, but it is almost a translation from Quevedo. "Celia altogether," by Whitehead, is sprightly and pleasing. "Love and folly" is either a pretty song or a pretty epigram. It may be proper to notice here that though all epigrammatic points are judiciously proscribed in the serious lyric, they are yet very admissible in the lighter kinds. Lord Chesterfield's little song beginning "Mistaken fair," &c. has much wit; and there is a vein of odd humour in a song not very new—"Vain are the charms of white and red," &c. Of modern song-writers, George Alexander Stephens, Mr. Sheridan, and Captain Morris have excelled most of their contemporaries in the facetious and witty.

As in prose, so the epistolary form will apply to any subject, and almost to any style of poetical composition. It suits best, however, with the moral, the familiar and the gay. Mr. Prior's Epistle to Fleetwood Shepherd is a happy specimen of the familiar epistle in verse. Mr. Pope's Epistle to Mr. Addison, occasioned by his Dialogues on Medals, is excellent in its kind; and Mr. Addison's Letter from Italy

contains some fine description, and some good poetry, though the style of his heroic verse is never equal to that of Mr. Pope.

Tales and fables may also be adopted into almost any species of poetry. An heroic poem is indeed only an extended tale; and Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* is a kind of story. Tales and fables are often happily introduced as illustrations in moral poetry. There are some very lively and interesting in the satires and epistles of Horace; and I have already remarked the excellence of Pope's *Sir Balaam*.

For nature, interest, and useful tendency, the best tale in our language is that of my friend Mr. M'Neil, "*Scotland's Scaith*." Of a different description, but extremely beautiful, is *Parnel's Hermit*. Dr. Goldsmith's beautiful tale of "*Edwin and Angelina*" has seemingly furnished the hint for the story of Dr. Percy's "*Friar of Orders Gray*," in which the author has ingeniously contrived to weave several detached fragments of ancient composition. Both are beautiful, but they want the moral of the two former pieces.

Phædrus was the first who composed fables

in verse ; but he is little more than a mere translator of Æsop, and has lost much of the simplicity and beauty of the original. The best poetical fables in any language are those of Mr. Gay.

LETTER XXIX.

Dramatic Poetry.—*Tragedy.*—*Æschylus.*—*Sophocles.*—*Euripides.*—*Corneille.*—*Racine.*—*Voltaire.*—*Shakspeare.*—*Otway.*—*Dryden.*—*Rowe.*—*Young.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

I SHALL proceed in this letter to a very brief consideration of dramatic poetry, a branch of literature of which your favourites the antients had very faint ideas indeed; and whoever draws his opinions from them, will never conceive properly of what we denominate, in plain English, (I cannot find a better word) a *play*. A play has this advantage above every other work of imagination, that it is a perfect representation of life: not only the ear and the understanding are interested, but the eye itself: it sees the whole action, and if the representation is a good one, the deception is almost complete, and we might mistake it for a reality.

“ Segnius irritant animos demissa per aures,
 “ Quam quæ sunt oculis commissa fidelibus & quæ
 “ Ipse sibi tradit spectator.”

DE ART POET. v. 180.

“ What we hear
 “ With weaker passion will affect the heart,
 “ Than when the faithful eye beholds the part.”

FRANCIS.

The word *drama* is universally allowed to be derived from the Greek verb *δρᾶω*, to do, and it might be literally explained an *action*. Our word *play* perhaps is still better, as it implies an *amusing* representation or entertainment; yet it is perhaps more applicable to representations of the gay or sportive kind than to those of tragedy.

Both terms, however, imply an action, or story, or plot as it is sometimes called, and this constitutes the difference between plays and dialogues. Some of the pastorals of Theocritus and Virgil might be termed little dramas, because they have something of plot or story; but the majority of eclogues are mere dialogues.

According to the nature of the subject, dramatic pieces class under two divisions, tragedy or comedy; though many modern performances

will not strictly fall under either of these characters ; and the mixture of both (the tragi-comedy) has been practised by some of our first writers, Shakspeare, Otway, Dryden, and Southern ; and is defended by some of our first critics, I think by Dr. Johnson, as a more perfect representation of real life.

The same rules in general apply to comedy as to tragedy. Aristotle has advanced precepts for their composition, all deduced from the practice of the Greek writers, and which have been most absurdly adopted by the French critics, and dramatic writers. But before we inquire into the reasonableness of these dictates of Aristotle, it will be proper to take a cursory view of the origin and progress of the Greek drama.

There is scarcely any circumstance in which the gradual progress of human invention is more exemplified, than in the origin and improvement of dramatic composition among the Greeks.

The Greek drama was originally nothing more than a rude song, exhibited by one or more clownish minstrels or ballad-singers, who disfigured themselves to excite attention.

Thespis, who lived 564 years before Christ, collected a company of them together, and transported them from village to village in a kind of waggon; and something like this state of the drama we see in the rude exhibitions of mummers, and morrice-dancers, in the inland parts of this kingdom. Thespis added to the singers an interlocutor, who served to explain the matter of the songs; and in this state the drama continued, till an accident brought it to greater perfection. In the representation of a tragedy, in which the furies were exhibited, the barbarous dresses of the chorus (which consisted of fifty persons) frightened the pregnant women into fits. Hence Æschylus was induced to retrench the number of the chorus, and to compensate for the deficiency, added to the actors or interlocutors. He erected a stage, and ornamented it with machinery; and equipped the actors with the robe, the buskin, and the mask.* The

* “ The drama owes its rise to days of festivity. For in antient times it was usual for men, when they had collected in the fruits of the earth, to meet together, that they might sacrifice to the deity, and unbend their minds from the fatigues of the harvest. Hence arose two sorts of poetry; the one graver, in praise of the gods; the other

two latter of which were accommodations to the large theatres; and if our managers proceed as they have lately done in enlarging our play-houses, our actors must be mounted in buskins, disfigured in masks, and must vociferate through speaking trumpets.

From this statement you will see how very imperfect the Greek drama was, and how very absurd those critics are who would confine us to a servile imitation of it. You will also see the reason of what are called the unities. The Greeks had but one scene, and as the actual performance was an ode, the chorus (or company of singers), which was originally the main object, never left the stage. The representation therefore admitted of no change

jocose, full of lampoon against one another. Under the former head we may reckon the Dithyrambics of Bacchus, hymns to the gods, and panegyrics upon heroes. Under the second, Iambics and Phallic verses. The first essays were rough, and unpolished; but, by degrees, the great actions of gods and heroes grew more numerous, and increased into set fables: so, in like manner, the jocose compositions began to come under proper regulations. Thus from the former kind arose tragedy; from the latter, satire, comedy, and mimic."—VOSSIUS, Lib. II. c. 2.

of place, and only of the time which was employed in the recitation. For the unity of action more is to be said ; since in every composition of human art it seems necessary to prevent confusion in the minds of the hearers.

A modern play, you must perceive, is a very different composition, and therefore to confine us to the same narrow limits as the Greek dramatists, is to say mankind shall never improve : yet upon this ridiculous system have critics proceeded ; nay, it has even been doubted by some of them whether the moderns have judged well in laying aside the chorus : it certainly added, they allege, both to the magnificence and morality of the stage, as it was always employed in commending virtue ; but surely it detracted very much from the probability of the performance. Either the chorus is detached from the tragedy, and then it is quite unnatural, or the persons of the chorus have some connection with the subject, and then it is very difficult for the poet to preserve the probability. As the chorus was first invented, it is no wonder it was retained so long a time ; but had the tragedy been first, it is very probable the other would never have had a being.

Upon these principles let us now examine what Aristotle had deemed indispensable—the three unities, of action, time, and place; the first of these I have always thought important to every composition, and I have already shewn in what it consists, namely, the relation of every incident to some great action or end; and it is no less necessary to preserve it in epic poetry than in tragedy. It is essential even to history, for the detail of two narratives at once, or the intermixture of them can only serve to confuse. The common practice is to divide the whole performance into five acts, though this practice has no foundation in nature: the first, it is said, should contain an exposition of the design of the representation; this was formerly performed in a long speech by way of prologue by one actor. Thus it is in Sophocles and Euripides; but the moderns have judged better in making the actors open the subject by discoursing together in the first act. In the second, third, and fourth acts, the plot should proceed and draw towards a crisis, and prepare gradually for the developement in the fifth act. It is a rule, which should always be observed, that no person should ever come upon the stage and go

off again without the reason of his appearance being obvious, and absolutely essential to the plot. Another rule is, that all the persons should be actually engaged in the business of the tragedy, and not introduced merely as hearers of the principal personages. This is a rule which has been greatly neglected by modern writers of tragedies, as the principal persons are commonly attended by a mute companion, or humble friend, who seems to have no other business on the stage than to afford them an opportunity of relating their story.

The second unity is that of time, which (according to those absurd critics who have merely copied from the imperfect sketches left by the ancients) requires that a play should occupy no more time in the supposed action than it does in the representation. Unity of place (according to the same prejudiced judges, who never looked at the origin of the prejudice) required that the scene should be never shifted from one place to another. By observing the first of these, the ancients had great difficulty to find any interesting events which could be supposed to be acted in so short a time; on this account Aristotle himself, who was a slave to precedent,

was obliged to change the time, and allowed them twenty-four hours.

That they might not violate the third unity, they were obliged to fix their action in some public place, such as a court or area before a palace; on which account much business was transacted there which ought to have been done in private.

The truth is, as I before observed, these two last unities arose out of the imperfection of the Greek drama. As the chorus never left the stage, the curtain was not let down between the acts. Shakspeare understood nature better than those pedantic critics who have extolled the unities of Aristotle; and surely, according to the modern custom, the spectators can, with no degree of violence upon the imagination while the action is suspended, suppose a certain time to elapse between the acts; and by a very small effort of the imagination, they can also suppose themselves transported, or the scene shifted, from one place to another.

Upon the whole then, it is plain the moderns have judged rightly in laying aside the chorus; and Shakspeare, who rejected the unities of time and place, has produced the best dramas.

Corneille and Racine, on the other hand, are generally very exact in the observation of Aristotle's rules, and their plays are proportionably vapid and lifeless.

The plot and the sentiment in tragedy should conspire to leave favourable impressions and opinions of virtue on the mind; if virtuous men suffer, it must render their virtues more amiable: this may be done by representing their misfortunes as the effects of the vices of others, or of their own failings; but they should never be made to suffer on account of their virtues. Aristotle observes, that the characters brought upon the stage should never be perfectly good or ill, but of a mixed kind. Mr. Addison's Cato is a very stiff character; as he is not affected with his own misfortunes, he does not raise in us that admiration which tragedy is designed to inspire. A stoic philosopher makes a bad hero of a tragedy.

Dr. Blair is justly surprised that the antient critics have thought the play of *Œdipus* the most proper subject of tragedy. *Œdipus* kills his father, and marries his mother, so that he is guilty both of parricide and incest without knowing it; and though he is represented as a

person of good moral disposition, he is made to end his days in the most miserable manner. Such a shocking action cannot be supposed to have happened above once or twice in the course of things, if it can be supposed to have happened at all; besides it tends rather to excite horror than pity. Almost a similar subject was chosen by an author of our own times (the late Earl of Orford), with certainly a much better moral, the misery attendant on the indulgence of all inordinate passions; yet that subject was much too shocking and indecent for the stage; and the manager would have deserved the severest censure who would have presented it to an English audience. I allude to the "Mysterious Mother."

The plot of a tragedy may be either founded upon real history, or be wholly fictitious. Shakspeare chose his subjects from Hollingshead or Stow, or from an old ballad; and in both he has succeeded. And though persons of high rank and fame are well calculated to excite attention in the *dramatis personæ*, yet the tragic muse may often descend into the recesses of private life, and produce perhaps a more interesting picture than if it had even proceeded

from a palace. This is evident in the charming tragedy of *George Barnwell*, and in one which, though inferior in merit is almost equal in moral utility, the *Gamester*.

There is hardly any subject which can deeply interest the passions that is improper for tragedy. The antients scarcely ever introduced the passion of love into their dramas; the French, till the time of Voltaire, I believe, never produced a tragedy without it. Shakspeare neither rejects it, nor deems it necessary on all occasions whiningly to introduce it.

The success of every dramatic production will chiefly depend upon the plot being well chosen and interesting. Some of Dr. Young's tragedies, which are now banished from the stage, are much finer as compositions than *Douglas*; but the interesting story of the latter will always render it popular. Shakspeare's plots are in general very happily chosen, even without excepting his historical plays; for though he has written these in a sort of series, yet he has seized upon the most interesting incidents and events in the reigns which he depicts.

Next to the judicious choice and arrange-

ment of the plot, the greatest excellence of a dramatic piece is the happy display of character. The unity of action (which is the only one I allow) must be here strictly preserved. In common life we observe men at different times swayed by different humours and passions ; yet still there is a discriminating character ; there is a turn of mind which evidently distinguishes one man from another. In dramatic representation this unity of character must be nicely preserved ; so that a spectator (if blindfold) ought to distinguish the personage who speaks, even without any reference to the voice of the actor. The character should extend through the whole piece ; he must not be a different man at the beginning from what he proves in the end. A contrast of characters has been recommended by critics, and in comedy it has certainly an excellent effect, as when the miser is opposed to the prodigal, the fop to the sloven, the loquacious to the sententious. But this does not appear so essential to tragedy, though Mr. Addison, in his *Cato*, has apparently studied to put all his characters in contrast.

A great error of all our modern tragic poets

is making all their characters speak in the same style. They endeavour to mark the character rather by some peculiarity in thought than in the manner of expressing it, whereas both should be observed. Hence their characters are often absurd without being striking, or more frequently are perfectly insipid. Shakspeare possessed that peculiar versatility of talent that his marked characters have not only a peculiarity of thought, but a peculiarity of language. Iago does not express himself like Othello; nor Cassio like either. Hamlet and the King do not speak alike, any more than Hotspur and the Prince. In comedy there is a greater scope for this kind of discrimination; but here it is also miserably neglected, unless where the Irish or Scotch accent can be called in aid of a barren imagination.

The language of tragedy must be dignified, yet not too poetical. We must never forget that it is a representation of nature and of conversation. It must not therefore appear too much studied; for that would destroy the pleasing illusion, which is its greatest charm.

On the same principle I abhor soliloquies. What person in real life, except an idiot or

madman, ever talks to himself? When we see an actor left upon the stage, and addressing the audience, for that in fact he does when he soliloquizes (as it is improperly called), the illusion is immediately dissipated, and we no longer see the character, but the actor. How Shakspeare came to be guilty of this grand oversight I can scarcely divine. It must have been either from custom or indolence.

For the same reason a tragedy in rhyme can never interest, because it never can furnish any illusion, or make us for a moment forget the author and actors, and imagine it a reality. Our English blank verse approaches so near to prose, that, when well spoken, the difference is imperceptible. Some of the best parts in Shakspeare are indeed in prose; and Lillo's natural and pathetic dramas entirely so. I have already said that the diction should be suited to the character; so it should be to the subject. A play on a modern or domestic topic should not be in blank verse.

Much nonsense has been advanced by the critics in the form of instructions for dramatic writers. Such as, that no actor should go off the stage more than five times; that the per-

sons of the drama should not exceed a limited number ; and that during the course of an act the stage should never be left vacant even for a single moment. All these pretended rules are bravely violated by our English writers ; and really I never could see any just argument for them.

For dramatic writing we cannot revert further than the Greeks ; for I do not concur with Bishop Lowth in regarding Job or the Canticles as dramatic pieces.

Of the Greek writers Æschylus is harsh and obscure ; Sophocles more masterly, correct, and sublime ; Euripides soft and tender. In the Greek tragedies, for the reason already assigned, the action was simple, and the incidents few. They are commonly founded on the history of their own nation, which should be an advantage to their descriptions. Hercules furnished six, and the Trojan war no less than seventeen subjects for tragedies. Their declamation (like that of the Italian opera), was set to musical notes ; and their chorusses changed from declamation to real song. Their actors wore a long flowing robe, and were raised on high buskins, called *cothurni* ; they also wore

masks, which were something like helmets, and were made to represent the persons whose characters they sustained. These masks had large mouths, which, by means of horn or brass plates, the Abbé du Boss ingeniously conjectures, strengthened the voice, and caused them to be heard at a greater distance ; but it may very reasonably be asked how would these masks represent the passions ? We learn, however, that they had also an expedient for this purpose ; the mask was painted so as to represent different passions on each side, and as the actors stood always in profile, they turned that side to the spectators which was most agreeable to their present passion ! What a contemptible idea does this give us of the Greek theatre, and yet it is the drama of the Greeks that prejudiced pedants wish us to copy ! What is still more extraordinary, we are told that sometimes one player spoke and another acted. We must remember, however, that the antient theatres were much larger than the modern ones, consequently the masks were of advantage both to the sight and the hearing ; and for the same reason, the spectators could not so easily discern the change of countenance in the actors,

especially as they acted by day, and their stage was not so well illuminated as ours; and as the masks kept the lips from moving, so that it could scarcely be perceived who spoke, it would not appear so ridiculous to us to have two engaged in the same part as we may imagine.

In France, Corneille and Racine have somewhat improved, though not much, on the Greek drama. They have introduced many more incidents into their plays than were found in the antient tragedies. Corneille is remarked by the French critics for his sublimity; Racine for describing the tender emotions; but the merit of both appears to me over-rated. Voltaire is more animated than Racine, and more interesting than either him or Corneille. Love always predominates in the French tragedies, and it is in general the love of a *petit-maître*. The French are also fantastically delicate, for they have banished all bloodshed from their stage; but this refinement, some of their own critics acknowledge they have carried too far, and, according to their own countryman Voltaire, they have quite enervated tragedy.

It may perhaps be affirmed that it is only on the English stage that a perfect tragedy is to be

seen. It is there that we find the just representation of nature, an action exhibited, such as the historian might narrate. The events not forced or unnatural, nor crowded within too narrow a space. There we see characters such as are to be found in real life, such as serve to conduct the business of the plot in its natural course, and to a natural catastrophe; not stiffly and artificially contrasted, as in the French dramas, where every principal character must have his particular opponent, of different stature, differently habited, of opposite manners; made just to contradict each other, like the buffoons on the stage of the mountebank.

In this as well as in every other department of the drama, Shakspeare necessarily stands alone. His was the infancy of the art, and the whole field was open to him. The judicious Lowth observes, "That the passion of jealousy, its causes, circumstances, progress, and effects, are more accurately, more copiously, more satisfactorily described in one drama of Shakspeare, than in all the disputations of philosophy."

Perhaps it may be allowed, in deference to

Bishop Lowth's judgment, that the drama to which he refers, *Othello*, is the most perfect of all our author's productions; and consequently the most perfect tragedy in existence in all its parts. If unity of action is (as I think) an excellence, here every incident contributes to the main design. The characters are incomparably adapted to the action. The unsuspecting simplicity of *Othello* is well combined with the violence of passion by which he is agitated when he thinks himself abused. When I was a very young man, I used to think the *Zanga* of Dr. Young a better drawn character than *Iago*, and so it is according to the artificial rules "for making tragedies," set forth by the tasteless followers of Aristotle, and the French critics; but more knowledge of the world has convinced me of my error. *Zanga* starts up at once a complete villain—He has the whole plot, its circumstances and consequences at once in view. This is not natural: not to speak of the improbability of his treasuring up his revenge, unabated and unchanged, for so great a series of years. We read in Tacitus of one (*Tiberius*) whose character was "*odium in longum jaciens*," but this is not the odium of

Zanga, stored up for so many years, uneffaced by reiterated kindnesses.

Iago, on the contrary, is a villain only by degrees: Malignant, envious, and fond of mischief, he enters upon his plan at first with only the vague and malevolent design of creating some uneasiness. In every progressive step he finds himself more deeply entangled, till at length in his own defence he is compelled to proceed. Even when the plot is considerably advanced, he sees not the end—

“Tis here but yet confused,

“Knavery’s plain face is never seen till used.”

The villainy of Iago is also prompted from time to time by many circumstances; offence, jealousy and resentment at Othello, envy of Cassio, the having cheated, and continuing to cheat Roderigo, all serve to involve him deeper and deeper, and to promote the catastrophe.

The incidents are truly interesting; the theft of the handkerchief, and Othello seeing it in Cassio’s hand, are incomparably wrought up. In short, whether in the tumultuous scene in the street, of rousing Brabantio, or in the scenes

after the arrival at Cyprus, we can scarcely imagine that it is a fiction which is presented to us.

The poetry of the impassioned parts is of the highest kind, and I think in the concluding speech of Othello there are more beauties than are any where comprized in the same compass.

Such is this astonishing production of human intellect; and yet I feel it almost rashness to pronounce it the master-piece of our author. In Lear there is something still grander, and perhaps the fable is still more generally interesting. Granting that the plots were not his own, still it is the judgment, taste, and genius of Shakspeare that is displayed in selecting such stories as serve for the basis of the most magnificent display of all the great passions incidental to human nature. Who will compare the cold and inanimate declamation of *Ædipus*, in the Greek tragedy, with the sublime burst of passion, when the old king resents the unfeeling ingratitude of his daughters? But even *Ædipus*, in the hands of Shakspeare, would have been a different character.

One thing I must remark of this exquisite drama, because I have not seen it remarked by others, and that is, the perfect consistency, in

the midst of seeming inconsistencies, with which the principal character is supported. Lear is introduced as a very choleric person ; and, conscious of the error of his own disposition, and distrustful of himself, it is curious to observe how he doubts the reality of his daughters' ingratitude, and appears desirous of referring at first to his own frailty. Thus, when the unkindness of his eldest daughter is first hinted to him, he observes—

“Thou but rememberest me of mine own faint conception : I have perceived a most faint neglect of late ; which I have rather blamed as mine own jealous curiosity.”

The unity of action is perhaps not quite so well preserved as in *Othello*. The under plot of *Gloster* and *Edgar* presents, it is true, a kind of contrast to the other ; but it is not necessary to the main action. All the characters are finely sustained ; that of *Kent* is original, and the most interesting under character perhaps to be found in any drama. Some of the speeches of *Lear* are highly poetical, especially

“ I tax not you, ye elements,” &c.

Hamlet is perhaps the most faulty of our au-

thor's dramas ; and yet it is perhaps the most interesting of them all in the representation. The plot is very ill conducted : the appearance of a ghost violates the probability of the action ; and yet, as Dr. Johnson well remarks, " the apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose : the revenge that was required is not obtained but by the death of him who was required to take it." The murder of Polonius, and the subsequent madness and death of poor Ophelia, who is all along cruelly treated, outrages humanity ; and Hamlet's neglect of the opportunity to kill the king when at prayers (and that upon the most shocking of motives, lest from the occasion he might obtain mercy of Heaven) seems to defeat the object of the play ; and reduces the author to a very awkward and disgusting catastrophe.

Where then lies the charm of Hamlet ? I answer, in the matchless genius of Shakspeare, who has combined in this play more variety of incident, more refinement of moral sentiment, more exquisite displays of human character than are to be found in any other drama. The ghost is such as no other author could have conjured up, solemn, dignified, yet ten-

der and pathetic. The incident of the play exhibited before the court is finely contrived; the spectator's interest is kept alive from the beginning for the fate of Hamlet; and the closet scene with the Queen is perhaps the finest specimen extant of dramatic dialogue. The pictures referred to are undoubtedly supposed to hang against the wall, as part of the furniture of the queen's closet.

Macbeth scarcely holds a lower rank than any of the preceding. I cannot agree with Dr. Johnson, that it is deficient in discrimination of character. I think the progress of wickedness is more finely marked in Macbeth than in any portrait that I have ever found. He commences a brave, honourable, and loyal person. One false step conducts to another, and he becomes gradually so depraved, that he declares

“ I am in blood

“ Stept in so far, that should I wade no more,

“ Returning were as tedious as go o'er.”

The machinery, which is grounded upon historical, or at least traditional evidence, is finely supported. I think it is Dryden that says :

“ But Shakspeare’s magic could not copied be,
“ Within that circle none durst walk but he.”

And I cannot but remark with indignation on the abominable manner in which this incomparable play is commonly represented. The witches, who are designed as very serious characters, are represented by buffoons. On the contrary, instead of the low comedians, the very best declaimers in the theatre ought to support these awful, I had almost said sublime personages; and every exertion should be made to add to the solemnity of the scene.

The versatility of Shakspeare’s talents is shewn in *Cymbeline*, where the passion of jealousy is exhibited under a different form and character to what it assumes in *Othello*. In his historical plays, the correctness with which the characters are drawn and sustained, as far as historical report enables us to judge, is greatly to be admired. The best I think are *Julius Cæsar*, and *Richard III.* In the former it is impossible not to observe how much better the character of Brutus is drawn by Shakspeare, than that of Cato by Mr. Addison.

Next to Shakspeare, our best tragic writer is undoubtedly Otway. Dr. Beattie most unac-

countably declares—"That the merit of *Venice Preserved*, and the *Orphan*, lies rather in the beauty of particular passages than in the general effect of the whole." If this was the case, it is plain that these plays would only affect and please a few individuals of nice taste and discrimination, whereas the populace are always attracted by them and delighted with them. I believe much finer passages might be selected from some of Dryden's plays than any which are to be found in Otway, yet these plays do not keep the stage, and are not admired on the whole. In truth a few fine passages will never support any drama. After Otway, Rowe and Young rank highest in the list of English tragic writers.

LETTER XXX.

*Comedy.—Aristophanes.—Plautus.—Terence.
—Moliere.—Shakspeare.—Jonson.—Beau-
mont and Fletcher.—Dryden.—Congreve —
Farquhar.—Vanburgh.—Steele.—Addison.
—Centlivre.—Sheridan.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

ON the subject of comedy I shall, I hope, be less prolix than on the other branch of dramatic poetry ; for much of what might be said on this topic is anticipated in my last letter. For good compositions of this kind, as well as of the former class, we must look to the moderns, and not to the antients ; indeed, as I observed, a play (strictly so called) may be regarded as a modern invention, at least what the antients have left us are to be considered only as hints on which modern dramatists have successfully improved. Aristophanes was a mere farce writer, a buffoon, almost destitute of the only qua-

lities that can render buffoonery tolerable, wit and humour. Plautus was much superior, and some of his dramas have both plot and character. Terence, who is regarded as a translator of Menander, is intolerably flat and tedious, and there is a sameness in all his dramas which renders the perusal of them, to me at least, insufferably irksome. In them there is very little of character or wit, nor indeed any one essential of a good play.

As I rejected Aristotle's rules respecting time and place in tragedy, so I think them equally absurd applied to comedy. The unity of action I would still insist upon for a general reason, which has been frequently repeated in the course of these letters.

The object of comedy is commonly regarded as diametrically opposite to that of tragedy; yet I am not one of that class of critics who condemn those mingled dramas, which sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter. "They approach nearer, says Johnson, than either (tragedy or comedy) to the appearance of life; they shew how great machinations and slender designs

may promote or obviate one another, and the high and low co-operate in the general system of unavoidable concatenation."

As, however, the provinces of each are distinct, though they may occasionally be united in the same production, we may be allowed to consider them under a distinct character.

The ends and principles of tragedy I formerly stated to be the passions of terror and pity ; the ludicrous and absurd are the objects of comedy ; and while the former is conversant in the great and important transactions of human life, the latter occupies itself with the lesser views and follies of men. The scene of tragedy is best laid in a different country, or at least at a different period of time ; but comedy should be suited to the common level of men, and therefore directly contrary in both these respects. Dr. Blair is of opinion that the scene should be most frequently laid in our own country, or at least not too far distant, to expose the reigning foibles : thus the general idea or definition of comedy is a satirical exhibition of the follies and improprieties of mankind. While this is strictly pursued, comedy may answer an excellent purpose, besides that of

amusement, and become subservient to the improvement of morals ; but in licentious hands it may be, as it too frequently is, made an instrument of corruption.

In writing comedy, as well as tragedy, the first object should be to find a really interesting story or plot, not too intricate, but such as will engage the audience, and keep attention alive. The next is to fill the drama with such an exhibition of characters, as will at once interest and amuse. Much has been said about contrasting the characters, but this is reducing genius to line and rule. The characters should naturally emanate out of the plot or story, and not be formed upon any mechanical or technical principles. They should be rather diversified than contrasted. To step "from grave to gay, from lively to severe," is a good rule, and where a contrast naturally presents itself, it will contribute to enliven the scene ; but probability should never be sacrificed to it.

In comedy something of exaggeration may be permitted. It is indeed a picture of life, but it is a picture in caricature. I believe, in truth, that any exact picture of life would tire or disgust on the stage, where we expect to see

something different from what we are every day accustomed to ; and for this reason such plays as are the most exact copies of life ; such as the Careless Husband, and the Jealous Wife, are the least interesting. Yet nature and probability must not be violated too far, for then it ceases to be a *representation*. The illusion must be kept up to the spectator ; he must for the instant believe it real, or the effect is lost. Nothing of a horrid or disgusting nature should be introduced into comedy, for then the cheerfulness and hilarity it is intended to excite would be destroyed. It is needless almost to add, that a comedy should always (for the same reason) have a fortunate conclusion : yet I must remark that, to achieve the end, in many modern comedies all probability is violated. The spendthrift is made frugal, the miser becomes generous ; and the greatest contrast is exhibited in the same personage, who is often the complete opposite at the end of the play to what he was in the beginning. The consistency of character is most ably maintained by Shakspeare and Moliere.

The language in comedy should be always adapted to the respective characters. In the

mouth of a clown, or a very low person, even vulgar language may be admitted ; but the style should in no case be too highly polished or refined, like the language of books. As the piece is a representation of life, so the language should be that of conversation ; and any thing above it is only natural in the mouth of a pedant or very affected person, a Malvolio, a Velum, or a Malaprop.

The first writers of comedy introduced living characters, and sometimes the most virtuous persons of the age, upon the stage, Socrates himself not excepted. This was, however, attended with great evils and disturbances, and at length they were prohibited by law from the exhibition of any living characters. Aristophanes is the principal author of this description now extant. The wit of these writers was, as I before hinted, of the lowest kind, and their discourses often obscene. What is called the middle comedy was an elusion of the laws, by introducing real characters under feigned names ; but we have no author of this kind now remaining. The new comedy consists in drawing pictures and characters, but not living ones.

Plautus and Terence were the most popular

comic writers among the Romans. Plautus has more of the truly *comic*; his characters are drawn with strong features, his language is also strong, but coarse. Terence is a strict observer of rules, but fails in strength; and what detracts from his merit is, that he is a constant imitator of the Greeks.

A considerable difference is to be observed between the French and the English comedy. The French are more regular, perhaps more tame; the English are irregular, but interesting and full of plot: I am afraid I must add, that the French are more decorous and chaste. If, indeed, I gave little praise to the French tragic writers, I cannot in justice be equally niggardly of applause to their comic drama. Moliere is himself an host: he abounds in character, wit and humour; his plots are ingenious, lively, and interesting; and in his plays in general we find little to offend a modest ear, or throw ridicule upon virtue. It must be allowed, however, that some of Moliere's plays (the much admired *Misanthrope*, for instance) are heavy and spiritless. Indeed, the French plays have in general less variety than the English; and perhaps this might in some measure

be accounted for from the nature of their despotic government, which had a tendency to spread a greater uniformity over their behaviour: but it is strange that the French, who are remarkable for their levity, and certainly not praise-worthy for their morals, should so far exceed the English in the decency and decorum of their comedies.

Since the time of Moliere, the French have invented a new kind of comedy, called *Larmoyante*. In this kind of writing, sentiment is more studied than plot or character; the plots chiefly turn on the discovery of some person, a woman, for instance, in mean circumstances, found to be the daughter of some rich man; or a wife finds her husband, whom she imagined lost or dead. This style of writing has also been introduced in England, under the name of sentimental comedy; but the humour of Goldsmith, and the wit of Sheridan, have laughed it off the stage.

In taking a short view of the English comic writers, Shakspeare must occupy not only the first, but the highest place. His dramas, after a lapse of two centuries, are still gazed at with unabated ardour by the populace, are still read

with admiration by the scholar. They interest the old and the young, the gallery and the pit, the people and the critic. At their representation appetite is never palled, expectation never disappointed. The changes of fashion have not cast him into shade, the variations of language have not rendered him obsolete. His plots are lively, and command attention; his characters are still new and striking, and his wit is fertile even to exuberance. Perhaps there never was a drama which so happily combined tender sentiment with comic force as "As You Like it:" there is scarcely a character in it which fails to interest. Adam and Jacques are truly original; and even the buffoonery of the clown is of a superior cast. In the Merchant of Venice the unity of action is somewhat violated by a double plot; but perhaps two plots were never so happily combined as in this play; and one rises so naturally out of the other, that not the smallest confusion is produced. The comic scenes pleasantly relieve the mind from the effect produced by the serious. The conclusion is unexpected, and the effect of the whole is truly happy. Gratiano appears to me a character which Shakspeare only could have

penned ; though, from the little interest which he has in the plot, he is less noticed than he would have been for his sportive wit, had he been of more importance to the main action. What an effort of imagination is the *Tempest* ! Magic, the tendency of which is naturally to excite horror and disgust, is converted into an instrument of gaiety and pleasure ; and the author can give diversity of character even to ideal beings, or rather seems as much conversant with the world of spirits as with the characters of men. Perhaps the *Merry Wives of Windsor* is one of the most regular of Shakspeare's comedies ; and I scarcely know a play that comes more completely under that description. The principal character, Falstaff, is, however, scarcely so well depicted as in *Henry the Fourth*. In the scenes with the Prince, when debauchery and cheating are the themes, the old Knight seems more in his proper element than in his rencounter with ladies. It is remarkable that, so early as Shakspeare's time, the paltry stage trick of exciting a vulgar laugh at the broken dialect of a foreigner was in use ; a trick which has since been almost the sole support of a comedy, but which was utterly

unworthy of the genius of Shakspeare. *Much Ado About Nothing*, though the subject in some measure justifies the title, is yet abundant in wit and pleasantry ; and *Measure for Measure*, and the *Twelfth Night*, are truly interesting. The *Winter's Tale* is the most irregular of our author's comedies : there the unity of time is indeed violated beyond all bounds : yet it contains some exquisite strokes of nature and poetry, and many pleasant playful scenes. Of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* it is difficult to judge by any of the rules of criticism ; it is, in every point of view, a most extraordinary piece, and I confess I should like to see it well performed. The scenes between Bottom, Quince, and their company of players, are exquisitely humorous. The *Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour Lost*, and the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, are the worst of our author's productions, if indeed they are really his.

Ben Jonson may be regarded as next in order of time to Shakspeare, but in genius he is greatly his inferior. Jonson was classically educated, and he endeavoured to reduce the English comedy to the rules of the critics. He studied character rather than plot ; but he crowds cha-

racters together in an artificial manner, and yet they are less striking than those of Shakspeare. Another circumstance unfavourable to the dramas of Jonson, when compared with those of his great master, is, that Jonson painted from the age in which he lived, Shakspeare from human nature itself. “He’s knight of the shire, and represents you all,” is a line that will apply to most of the characters of Shakspeare. Hence his plays are in fashion in every age; while those of Jonson are now almost banished from the stage.

Beaumont and Fletcher wrote rather on the model of Shakspeare than of Jonson;* yet in their plots they are somewhat more regular than the former; but the composition is incorrect, though they contain many beauties. Dryden informs us that the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher were the reigning favourites of his time, two of theirs being acted for one of Shakspeare’s: they have, however, had their day, for at present only one of them keeps the stage, “Rule a Wife and Have a Wife;” which, notwithstanding a strain of indelicacy in it, is still po-

* With Jonson they were contemporaries.

pular, from the entertainment which it affords, by an interesting plot supported by much humour.

I shall pass over a multitude of comic writers whose plays are now consigned to oblivion, and even Dryden himself, (whose excellence was certainly not comedy, though in the Spanish Friar there is much pleasantry and wit) to mention Congreve, an author of whom you must have heard much, though I dare believe you have never seen one of his plays performed. The last of them that I remember to have been acted is *Love for Love*, which is certainly one of his worst. The plays of Congreve, like those of Jonson, are deficient in plot: the characters too are not well discriminated; they are only depicted in the sentiment, for they all speak the same language. They abound in wit, and but little in what is properly called humour. They are, at the same time, disgraced occasionally by gross obscenity.

Farquhar and Vanburgh had both better notions of what a comedy should be than Congreve; yet they are well characterized by Pope—

“What pert, low dialogue has Farquhar writ!

“Van wanted grace, who never wanted wit.”

One comedy of Vanburgh's, however, which was corrected by Cibber, and therefore passes under their joint names, is excellent, and that is “*The Provoked Husband*,” which is unexceptionable in every respect, except in having a double plot.

The comedies of Mrs. Centlivre are lively and interesting; and it is no small commendation to say, that even at this distance of time two of her's still continue to be popular, “*The Wonder*,” and “*A Bold Stroke for a Wife*.”

Sir Richard Steele must rank among our best comic writers. The hint of his *Conscious Lovers* is taken from Terence; but how infinitely is it improved! Mr. Addison too succeeded better in comedy than in tragedy; and his *Drummer* is, in my opinion, one of the very best that ever was written conformably to the rules of Aristotle.

Of the modern stage it would be, in some measure, indecorous to speak; yet I cannot conclude my letter without naming one author of singular merit—you anticipate the name of

Sheridan. Perhaps no man since the days of Shakspeare ever possessed equal powers for the drama. We have several other writers, who, if they do not write for posterity, at least contribute to the entertainment of the present age, and are lively and spirited. Of the translations from the German (so much in fashion) I have seen but one, and that is *The Stranger*, and I confess it has left me not the slightest wish to see any more from the same manufactory. In its plot it is immoral, and very deficient both in humour and character.

LETTER XXXI.

Epic Poetry.—*Homer.*—*Apollonius Rhodius.*
Virgil.—*Lucan.*—*Tasso.*—*Camoens.*—*Erecilla.*—*Voltaire.*—*Milton.*

MY DEAR JOHN,

THE day of epic poetry seems in a great measure to be passed by; and it is to be apprehended that no modern epic poem will have any permanent success; the rules, therefore, which I have to lay down, and the criticisms I shall have to advance, will rather respect the past than either the present or the future. In what has been done however, there is an immense field opened for admiration, and it is ever a most pleasing exercise of the mind to review the highest exertions of the human imagination, and to enumerate the triumphs of human genius.

Men destitute of taste may pass by with a supercilious contempt the petty wars between a few piratical states of Greece, and a town (so

contemptible that the ruins are not even extant) on the opposite shore. But the work of Homer, which could make great things out of small, must still be contemplated, like the pyramids of Egypt, as an object which, being the work of man, cannot fail to interest us, while we feel we are men. No person in his senses believes the fabulous voyage of Æneas from Troy to Italy, much less the descent of the Cæsars from Ascanius ; but every *line* of the poem which celebrates these imaginary topics contains fine poetical beauty ; and while we read, in opposition to conviction, we involuntarily

“ Hold each strange tale devoutly true.”

Such is the charm of real poetry, and may I ever be such an intellectual epicure as to relish heartily these mental illusions !

“ Perish that critic pride, which oft has hurl’d
“ Its empty thunders o’er the epic world ;
“ Which, eager to extend its mimic reign,
“ Would bind free fancy in a servile chain ;
“ With papal rage the eye of genius blind,
“ And bar the gates of glory on the mind.”

To be diffuse in precepts for what I deem

almost impracticable, you must perceive would be absurd. Or if we admit that some genius of a superior cast should hereafter appear, he will be able to make laws for himself. A second Bonaparte, he will establish a new code of legislation for other nations of the world.

An epic poem is a representation, and in part a dramatic representation, of some important action.* Yet it essentially differs from all pieces composed for scenic exhibition. Dramatic compositions distinguish characters by the passions, epic poems by the actions. In an epic poem, however, there are three objects to be considered, the action, actors, and narrative. First, it is necessary that the ACTION should be *one*. I have had occasion often to shew the necessity of unity of action in every composition; and I may add, that this makes a fuller impression on the hearers than a number of incidents which have no connexion with one another. The unity of action has particularly been expected in this kind of composition, even since Aristotle's time, who first took particular

* Οτι δει τος μυθος καθ'απερ εν ταις τραγωδιας συνισταναι δραματικος. ARISTO. Περὶ ποιητικῆς, c. 3. TRAPP, Prelect. Lec. xxix.

notice of it; but it must not be a slight unity, as the action of one man, but a strict connection, a train of means pointing to some end; so the main end of the *Æneid* is the establishment of *Æneas* in Italy. In the *Odyssey*, it is the return of *Ulysses* to *Ithaca*; and in the *Iliad*, the effects of the resentment of *Achilles*. Though it is not so sensible in the *Odyssey*, as the poet begins in the middle of the subject, yet it is more pleasant than in the *Iliad*, where we must always look back for the causes of the action to the commencement of the poem. Milton is very accurate as to unity. By closely adhering to unity, I do not however mean that every event should be exactly narrated according to the order of time, or that the poet should be always confined to one single action; he may, consistently with unity, introduce several episodes into his poem, but these must not be digressions from the main end and action, but lesser acts or inferior incidents. The word episode is derived from tragedy; the song of the chorus was the original part of that performance, and all the speeches which are introduced to give some respite to the chorus, were called episodes. The word, however, is employed in

a different sense by the moderns ; for by them it is something not essential to the main action, but related or connected with it. Thus the adventures of Ulysses with Polyphemus, Circe, the Syrens, &c. are episodes. They have all some tendency to carry on the chief design ; yet they are not so essentially necessary, but that any of them might be taken away without breaking in upon the chief action. Such are the adventures of Nisus and Euryalus, and the funeral games in Virgil. The descent of Æneas into hell is one part of the main action ; but all things which happen there, except consulting his father, are episodes. It has been established as a general rule, that episodes ought never to be foreign to the main design, and that they ought not to be too long. As they are intended to diversify the poem, their chief design is ornament, and therefore they should be particularly elegant and finished. An epic poem on the whole should be entire or complete, according to Aristotle, and should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, which certainly is nonsense when applied to epic poetry exclusively, as it may serve for every composition which is not the raving of a madman. Again,

the action must be great and interesting, and such as may justify the apparatus the poet has been at the pains to set before us. This is sufficiently evident, nor have any of the great poets failed in the choice of their action. Hence it may be asked, whether an epic poem ought uniformly to end well? It appears most probable it ought; for as the time is much longer than that of tragedy, to end miserably after the recital of so many misfortunes, would too deeply distress the mind. Milton, however, is an exception; but it may be doubted whether he is happy in this respect. The subject of an epic poem should not be of too recent date: it should never be written from any history with which we are well acquainted; for the imagination may sport with the events and characters of former ages, and we can easily believe the latter much more perfect, than those with whom we are in a manner acquainted. Lucan and Voltaire are the only poets who have acted contrary to this rule. The *time* or duration of the *action* may, according to the critics, be considerably longer in an epic poem than a dramatic composition: the action of the *Iliad* employs

forty-seven days,* that of the *Æneid* five years and a half, and the *Odyssey* about eight years. But if we compute, according to some, from the sailing of Ulysses from the isle of Calypso, and the dispersion of the fleet of *Æneas*, the latter only occupies fifty-eight days, and the former one year and seven months.†

There are some reasons why an epic poem should commence somewhere in the course of the action, indeed near the conclusion: 1st, because of the variety which it gives to the poem, by making it in part dramatic, and putting a part of the narrative into the mouth of the principal character; 2d, because it excuses the poet from that minuteness, and consequent tediousness, which would be necessary in pursuing the hero through every circumstance of the narrative; 3d, the introduction of a part of the narrative in that way pleases by the air and ingenuity which is displayed by the poet in the manner of introducing it, and the surprise it occasions; 4thly, it affords room for more animated strokes of passion, than if the whole story was told by the poet—

* Bossu.

† Ibid.

“ Quæ ipse miserrima vidi,
“ Et quorum pars magna fui. Quis talia fando
“ Temperet a lachrymis,” &c. VIRG.

“ Those direful scenes I saw on Phrygia’s shore,
“ Those wars in which so large a part I bore,
“ The fiercest Argive would with tears bewail,” &c.
PITT.

As in the drama, so in epic poetry, the characters should be properly adapted to the plot, and should seem to rise naturally out of it. Each individual must be possessed of peculiar features, to distinguish him from others. Homer excels in this part; the characters of Virgil are more general, and not so easily distinguished. The only particular and well-drawn character in the *Æneid* is Dido, which is strongly marked. The epic however, with respect to character, differs from the drama essentially in one instance. In the drama supernatural beings, and particularly the deities of a superior order, are almost interdicted. In an epic poem, on the contrary, they are always expected. Why this low, mean, and inexpressive term *machinery* has been applied to this portion of epic poetry I have never seen rationally accounted for. It has arisen, I apprehend,

among modern critics, from some metaphysical notion, that all the events of the poem are *put in motion* by the machinery of supernatural agency. Thus in Homer, where any thing wonderful is recounted it is ascribed to the gods, as when the horse of Achilles speaks—

Αὐθιγεντα δ' ἔειπε θεα λευκώλενος Ἥρη.

IL. xix. v. 407.

“ Then, strange to tell (so *Juno will'd*) he broke
“ Eternal silence, and portentous spoke.”

POPE.

The machinery of every epic poem should be such as is consonant to the popular belief at the time the poem is composed, otherwise it will be coldly introduced by the poet, and without effect to the reader. Allegorical machinery only serves to remind us that we are perusing fiction; and neither this, nor obsolete mythology can awaken the passions of awe and terror. After all, machinery should be sparingly used, and with great discretion, for in epic poetry as well as tragedy the rule is a good one—

“ Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus.”

DE ART. POET. v. 191.

“ Nor let a god in person stand display’d,

“ Unless the labouring plot deserve his aid.”

FRANCIS.

Homer makes perhaps too free use of his machinery ; and indeed debases his divinities below the characters of men ; but the Greek mythology was but a clumsy and puerile system. It can only please children, and is justly exposed to the sarcastic censure of Lactantius, and the ridicule of Lucian.

If the difficulty of composing a good epic poem is so great as all critics have concurred in representing it ; if the fable must be happy, popular and interesting ; the characters well chosen, striking and new, and the poetry abounding in every charm of verse, we cannot wonder, if in such long undertakings, so few have succeeded. Yet every age has been fertile in epic poems. Petrarch, and even Boccaccio, composed each one. Sir Richard Blackmore produced no less than four, and even in our own time some compositions of this description, and of considerable merit, have made their appearance.

But, whatever may be the fate of our contemporary epic poets, very few of those who

have preceded them have met with that attention from posterity with which their authors doubtless flattered themselves, and which perhaps many of them might really deserve. Perhaps very long poems have a natural tendency to sink into oblivion by their own weight, unless supported by some very striking circumstances, or something peculiarly interesting in the plot, or fable ; while a short poem may subsist on one brilliant passage. Even the charitable muse of Mr. Hayley can summon but a few as worthy candidates to the epic banquet, though he seems to have pressed Dante, Ariosto, and even Gresset, whose hero is a parrot, into the service. I shall present you with a still less voluminous catalogue.

Homer is not only the first epic poet, but one of the first of poets. Mr. Pope, I think, calls the *Iliad* “ the oldest book extant, except the Bible.” Yet I think I perceive some internal evidence to induce me to believe him a little posterior to Hesiod. If we consider the period at which he composed, the works of Homer can scarcely be contemplated with sufficient admiration. Not that I am prepared to join in the praises which distempered pedants have

lavished on this wonderful person. I cannot find in him every art and science. I cannot agree that, "the philosopher discovers in him the first rudiments of moral knowledge, or the physician the science of diseases and their cures." "The astronomer and the legislator" must resort to superior authority. Still the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are wonderful productions. In the original no small share of their utility and interest arises from the striking and evidently correct picture which they exhibit of the manners, language, modes of thinking and of acting at so early a period of society. This effect is lost in Mr. Pope's translation, but in return he has presented us with poems richer than the originals in every poetical beauty. I feel myself confirmed in this last sentiment not only by the verdict of Dr. Johnson (always a high authority), but by the fact, that no literal translation of Homer has ever been acceptable to the public taste. There is a *curiosa felicitas* in the original language of every good author which cannot be transfused, and Mr. Pope, as he *could* not give us every excellence of Homer, was right to compensate for the loss by some beauties of his own. In his English Homer he

has brought his author nearer to the character and standard of Virgil's *Æneid*. Yet the version, where the subject and sentiment of the author would admit of it, is much more literal, correct, and even condensed, than might have been expected. I say condensed, for it is the nature of translation to expand by periphrasis, rather than to keep within the bounds and limits of the original. Dr. Johnson says of Mr. Pope, that "he has left in his Homer a treasure of poetical elegance to posterity. His version may be said to have *tuned* the English tongue; for since its appearance no writer, however deficient in other powers, has wanted melody. Such a series of lines, so elaborately corrected, and so sweetly modulated, took possession of the public ear, the vulgar was enamoured of the poem, and the learned wondered at the translation."

A question has been lately agitated, which however does not in my opinion admit of a debate. It has been gravely asserted that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have been composed in detached fragments, and by different hands; that these fragments were afterwards collected and (I can use no other than a vulgar term) patched to-

gether, and each made into a whole. It would really be to insult your understanding to argue in detail on such an absurd hypothesis. Unity of action is one of the great praises of Homer, especially in the *Iliad*. The fable is one complete plot, all the incidents tending to the same end. More than this, there is even a unity of character, and this is preserved religiously through each poem. We know, and almost anticipate (after we are acquainted with the characters) what Nestor, Achilles, or Ulysses will say upon any subject. Can such a poem then be the work of different persons without union or correspondence with each other? Can any thing in criticism itself be more absurd than such a supposition? But further still, there is even in Homer a uniformity of language and style. Every author has a vocabulary of his own, and Homer's is not extremely copious. The same words and phrases continually occur, and sometimes the same verses. Where are the breaks, the junctures? where is the hand of the compiler who put these fragments together discernible? who has discovered, or who can discover interpolation in Homer? That different portions of such large

poems might be dispersed in various hands throughout Greece, is very probable, from the difficulty at that period of obtaining transcripts of the whole. Many of these might be collected and collated in order to make the copy more complete. But both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* bear every mark of proceeding from the same mind, and each was unquestionably from the first a perfect whole. What an age must it have been indeed to produce seven or eight poets, who could write like Homer? Why had we not as many Shakspeare's in the reign of Elizabeth?

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may be regarded as models for all epic writers. In taking a hasty view of the former of these poems, I would observe, that when we open the *Iliad*, we must prepare ourselves for a picture of the antient world; without this reflection we shall lose many of its beauties, which I observed consist in giving us a lively delineation or description of the early ages. In the days of Homer, for instance, the ordering of an entertainment was an action of importance; the greatest heroes were allowed to praise themselves, and to indulge in the most bitter invectives against their

enemies, neither consistent with the modern notions of politeness, or even decency. In the opening of the *Iliad* we find none of that dignity we should now expect at the commencement of an epic poem. Two chiefs contend for a female captive, which to us appears a subject of small importance, yet this is the point upon which the whole action turns. The priest of Apollo demands his daughter, who had been given to Agamemnon, and upon his being compelled to resign her, he forces Briseis from Achilles, who on this account withdraws his troops from assisting the Greeks against the Trojans, and from his anger all the train of actions follow.

The subject of the *Iliad* is, however, well chosen; there was no object more splendid or of greater dignity than the war of Troy, at the period the poet wrote; for Homer lived about the second or third century after the Trojan war, when every thing was magnified by tradition. As there was at that time no regular record of public transactions, the real actions performed in these wars must have been in some degree obscured, so that the poet was allowed to con-

nect them with what fables he pleased, if they did not contradict the tradition. He has not, however, chosen the whole war for his subject, but only one of the latter scenes, and indeed the most important of the whole.

All the different incidents are disposed in the most regular manner, and Achilles, the principal hero, is never out of our view through the whole. Homer excels all poets in characteristic expression; that which Virgil expresses in a short sentence, furnishes Homer with matter for a long conversation. He is dramatic throughout, and this mode of expressing himself has great advantages, for undoubtedly to set the person before our eyes will make a stronger impression upon the reader than the simple recital of facts by the poet. All his characters, as I before observed, are strongly marked. No two of his heroes act or speak alike. Even Priam and Paris are characters. The female personages have their peculiar features. The picture of Helen is finely drawn in his third book; the poet takes care she shall never appear odious, still blending some virtues with her vices: she is a character which,

though we must condemn, we cannot hate ; and yet she is nicely contrasted with the chaste and amiable Andromache.

The machinery of Homer is perhaps the most defective part of his poems ; but this was not his fault, but that of the puerile mythology which he was obliged to follow. His gods are mere men, and hardly so respectable as his heroes.

On the *Odyssey* I differ from the majority of critics, for it seems to me to possess more genius than the *Iliad*. That imagination must have been most fertile that could invent such a story, and carry it through the various incidents with such consummate art and address. The adventures of Ulysses among the Sirens, the Cyclops, and in the islands of Circe, are more entertaining than any romance that ever was penned. The *Odyssey* has also more domestic incident than the *Iliad* : it presents us with more pleasing and more exact pictures of the antient manners. Eumæus, for instance, is a character beloved by every reader ; and the natural incident of the old and faithful dog must touch every heart. Perhaps the latter parts are tedious and languid : Ulysses seems to remain

too long undiscovered among the suitors : the difficulty with which Penelope is convinced of the reality of her husband's arrival, deprives us of those emotions we expected from the discovery, and the conclusion is perhaps abrupt. The travels of Telemachus are all episodes, and we cannot easily see the connection of his adventures with the rest of the poem ; in every other part the unity is well preserved, and it occupies only forty-one days from the proper opening of the poem.

The difficulty of succeeding in this species of composition is, I think, sufficiently apparent, when we reflect that Greece, the very soil of genius, where imagination flourished as the beauties of the vegetable world under a tropical sun, has left to posterity only two epic poems, and those by the same master, and on the same subject.

An amiable poet, and an excellent critic of our own times has, however, brought forward another Grecian candidate for epic fame. As I confess myself not conversant with the poem of Apollonius Rhodius, I must satisfy myself with transcribing Mr. Hayley's character of that author—

“ Yet may not judgment, with severe disdain,
“ Slight the young RHODIAN’S variegated strain;
“ Tho’ with less force he strike an humbler shell,
“ Beneath his hand the notes of passion swell.
“ His tender genius, with alluring art,
“ Displays the tumult of the virgin’s heart,
“ When love, like quivering rays that never rest,
“ Darts thro’ each vein, and vibrates in her breast.
“ Tho’ nature feel his verse, tho’ she declare
“ Medea’s magic is still potent there,
“ Yet fancy sees the slighted poet rove
“ In pensive anger thro’ th’ Elysian grove.
“ From critic shades, whose supercilious pride
“ His song neglected, or his powers decried,
“ He turns indignant—unopprest by fears,
“ Behold, he seeks the sentence of his peers.
“ See their just band his honest claim allow.”

The Iliad and Odyssey undoubtedly gave birth to the Æneid, and Virgil has imitated Homer in very many instances. Yet the Æneid has quite a distinct character from both the poems of Homer, and the Roman poet is essentially different from the Greek. Homer wrote in a rude and barbarous age; Virgil at a period when manners were civilized, and science very generally diffused. “ He therefore (as Dr. Johnson remarks), found the state of the world so much altered, and the demand

for elegance so much increased, that mere nature could be endured no longer ; and perhaps in the multitude of borrowed passages, very few can be shewn which he has not embellished."

" There is a time (adds this venerable critic) when nations emerging from barbarity, and falling into regular subordination, gain leisure to grow wise, and feel the shame of ignorance, and the craving pain of unsatisfied curiosity. To this hunger of the mind plain sense is grateful ; that which fills the void removes uneasiness, and to be free from pain for a while is pleasure ; but repletion generates fastidiousness ; a saturated intellect soon becomes luxurious, and knowledge finds no willing reception till it is recommended by artificial diction. Thus it will be found in the progress of learning, that in all nations the first writers are simple, and that every age improves in elegance."

The grand characteristic therefore of Virgil, as opposed to Homer (and perhaps to all other poets), is elegance. Yet he is extremely happy in the choice of his subject, for never could he have chosen one more interesting to the Romans, than that of deducing their ori-

gin from *Æneas*. Virgil combines the plot of the *Odyssey* with that of the *Iliad*, and there is, perhaps, no where to be found so complete a subject for an epic poem : the unity is exactly preserved through the whole ; but there is almost no character marked in the *Æneid*, and the personages are only made known to us by their names. *Æneas* is pious and brave, but not interesting ; he is eloquent, but not fervid ; he is a warrior, without fire and spirit ; and a lover without gallantry. *Dido* is the only character that is strongly marked ; her unhappy, yet finely described passions, render her much more animated than any of the rest. We must admit, however, that Virgil excels in narration ; and perhaps there never was a more finished specimen of poetry in this line, or one more abounding in animated and interesting description than the second *Æneid*. The third is also beautiful, and has all the charm of variety and entertainment. Some passages of the fourth are also incomparable. It has been remarked that the last six books of the *Æneid* are inferior to the former, and that the genius of the poet seems to lose somewhat of its former vigour. This I

believe will be found to result from the nature of the subject, which is less susceptible of beauties ; and unfortunately all the most interesting parts of the poem are the first read.

One sensation I have felt with respect to Virgil, whether it may correspond or not with those of other men I cannot tell. In reading the *Æneid* for any length of time, in an uninterrupted series, I find the appetite palled as by an excess of sweetness ; but when I casually encounter a short quotation from it, I feel charmed. There is in every thought, in every phrase, something that arrests attention. The richness of his diction, the *curiosa felicitas*, is such, that almost every word seems to fill the mind with various images, and to excite grand or pleasing ideas. I have remarked the same with respect to annotations from Milton and *Hudibras*. Great must be the excellence of that poetry or wit, which can make such an impression by piece-meal—

“ *Disjecta membra poetæ,*”

and which will bear so nice an inspection. It reminds me of some exquisite pieces of machinery, the ingenuity and excellence of which

are chiefly discovered when they are viewed through a microscope.

The next epic poem of consequence which the genius of Rome produced, is the "Pharsalia" of Lucan. He is universally allowed to hold an inferior rank to both Homer and Virgil; and his failure is generally ascribed to the recent date of the facts which form the subject of it, and the want of the usual machinery. I cannot conceive, however, that the mere story of the Pharsalia, even if narrated by an historian, is inferior to that of the Iliad, embellished even by the invention of the poet; and I am sure the machinery of Lucan is much more sublime than that of either Homer or Virgil; of this a single instance will be sufficient, the description of the sorceress in the sixth book. The truth is, that Lucan wants the invention of Homer, and the polish and elegance of Virgil. There is nothing in the Pharsalia which, as an effort of the imagination, can compare with the scenes and adventures described in the Odyssey. Lucan narrates his story too much in the way of an historian, without variety of arrangement and embellishment. In style he is exceedingly inferior to Virgil; his

colouring is less vivid ; his figures are often trite, and sometimes imperfect, and his diction by no means so happily chosen as that of Virgil. For all these faults there is sufficient excuse ; we must regard the work of Lucan as the unfinished production of a very young man : for he was murdered by the execrable tyrant Nero at the age of twenty-six ; and though he may be allowed a less portion of poetical merit, strictly so speaking, than the two great masters of epic, yet for the bold and philosophical sentiments, the manly eloquence, and the grandeur and importance of the narration, the *Pharsalia* is read, and probably will continue to be read with greater pleasure than most productions of the epic muse. “ Let us remember,” says Mr. Hayley, “ that in the most polished nations of Europe the most elevated and poetic spirits have been his warmest admirers : thus in France he was idolized by Corneille, and in England translated by Rowe.” Dr. Johnson regards Mr. Rowe’s *Lucan* as the second translation in our language ; but I think it is at least rivalled by Mr. Mickle’s *Lusiad*.

The next epic poem which demands our attention is Tasso’s *Giurusalemme Liberata*. It

is founded on a grand, heroic, and venerable enterprize. The author's invention is noble and fertile : the events are striking and sufficiently diversified, by the tenderness of love and the fierceness of war : the heroes are well characterized. Godfrey is represented as generous, moderate, and brave : Tancred is tender and impassioned : Rinaldo, who is the principal hero, is drawn after Homer's Achilles. The machinery of Tasso is to me more interesting than that of any other poet. The fourth and ninth book contain some incomparable passages and descriptions ; but some have thought that his demons act too great a part. The plot seems to turn too much upon enchantment. Rinaldo leaves the army in discontent, and retires into a desert island, where he is confined by spells. The chiefs are informed of the necessity of his presence to their success ; hence some of them are sent in quest of him : they find him in this island, break the spells of the demon, who endeavours to detain them, and then hurry him along with them to the army, where he breaks all the enchantments which retard their success : after this every thing proceeds happily to a conclusion. The whole of

the sixteenth and seventeenth books are more worthy the genius of Ariosto than of Tasso. His descriptions, however, are fine, and rise happily towards the conclusion : the language is harmonious and elegant ; and the poem in general displays infinitely more genius than Voltaire's *Henriade*.

Camoens, the epic poet of Portugal, was contemporary with Tasso. I am extremely partial to this poem. I read the original many years ago ; but it was little known in England, till an excellent translation was published by the late Mr. Mickle. The poem has infinite merit ; every part of it interests and entertains ; and it is justly entitled to the appellation of epic. You are aware that the subject is the discovery of India by Vasco de Gama. The characters in general are tolerably well drawn, but not so well supported as might be wished. The subject too, you will be inclined to observe, is too recent, and the cruelties which the Portuguese committed naturally prejudice us against it. Notwithstanding this, the subject is novel and grand ; it affords an admirable scope for description, and for the introduction of very interesting scenes. If *Paradise Lost* is

emphatically styled the epic poem of religion, this justly may be denominated that of commerce ; and if we read Homer and Virgil for pleasure, and to admire the poetry, let me add, we cannot read this without reaping some further improvement, a knowledge of nature and of the globe which we inhabit.

Spain can also boast of an epic poem of no inconsiderable merit, as appears from the sketch with which Mr. Hayley has favoured us, the *Arancana* of Don Alonzo de Erecilla. This epic poem differs from all others, for the author celebrates a course of military actions in which he had himself a share, the reduction, by the Spaniards, of the Arancanians, an Indian nation of singular heroism, in the country of Chili. The poem certainly contains fine passages, but is much inferior to the *Lusiad* of Camoens. It has not yet been translated into English.

The *Henriade* of Voltaire seems to demand a few observations. As this was written by a person of extraordinary genius, we are led to expect something uncommon : his boldness in attempting an epic poem in this age deserves our admiration ; but the French language

seems improper for epic poetry, and the author has failed in other respects. The subject of the poem is the triumph of Henry IV. over the arms of the League : it lies under the same disadvantage with respect to the recentness of the date, &c. with Lucan's *Pharsalia* ; and it would have been better had the author followed the example of Lucan, which he recommends as judicious, concerning the machinery. The poem opens with an interview between Henry, and Elizabeth, Queen of England. He has used fiction in order to bring together these two great personages, and to give his hero an opportunity of relating the exploits of the wars. Now it is well known to every one that Henry never was in England : besides, though Virgil makes *Æneas* properly enough relate his adventures to Dido, who cannot be supposed to have had any particuler account of them ; yet we cannot suppose the Queen of England could be ignorant of what was done by the French King, until he came himself to inform her. The whole poem is employed on the subject of a civil war of the most detestable and bloody kind, and which presents ideas too shocking to the mind to excite our admiration.

His episodes also are not full, for the poem is not long, yet it contains a great many important events, which are generally related in a very imperfect manner. But he is peculiarly unhappy with respect to the machinery; he has introduced chiefly allegorical beings, as Discord, War, Fanaticism, La Politique, and Love, which are the worst that can be employed in epic poetry. By mixing truth and falsehood together they render the whole improbable. The appearance of St. Lewis to Henry IV. is, however, much better; the whole is wrought up with great judgment, and is certainly one of the best parts of the poem. The descent into hell is also well managed.

Although Voltaire is not conspicuous for his zeal for religion, yet he understood the necessity of it in his poetry; hence it is full of the most noble and generous sentiments, and in these consists its greatest merit.

Though Milton's *Paradise Lost* was published long anterior to the poem I last noticed, the custom I have followed of considering the British writers the last in order, seems to justify my present arrangement. After the criticisms of Mr. Addison and Dr. Johnson, which are in

every body's hands, there remains but little to be said upon this extraordinary performance. This being the case, my own sentiments will, I am sure, please you better than those of any other critic. Whether from the nature of his subject, with which every person is familiar; or whether, from any defect of the arrangement, Milton pleases more in detached parts than in the whole. With the plot or fable we are perfectly acquainted; and it is unfortunate for Milton, though happy for society, that the Bible is universally read. The plot does not to me appear to warrant so extensive a detail. The poet probably indulged his own inclination and habits in the middle book, when he makes—

“ God the Father turn a school divine.”

But he should have had some mercy on his readers, who might not have so strong a relish for these metaphysical disputations as he had himself. Yet even this is curious and interesting, not indeed to the multitude, but to all persons who think, and who wish to know the state of theological opinions at that period of time in which Milton wrote. These discussions, I

must observe also, are maintained with dignity, and supported with all the ingenuity and learning that was possible. Milton was perhaps the most learned man of his time; his learning is apparent in almost every line that he has composed; and so far the least interesting parts of *Paradise Lost* are valuable, as affording an animated picture of the knowledge of the times.

This however is foreign to his praise as an epic poet. In that view we must allow his plot to be regular, his action undisturbed by any collateral circumstances, his characters (in Pandemonium at least) strongly marked and well defined. But still he seems to have protracted his plot beyond the proper limits; and therefore, as Dr. Johnson remarks of the *Paradise Lost*, "its perusal is rather a duty than a pleasure; it is one of those books which the reader admires, and lays down and forgets to take up again." To one excellence of Milton, however, the great critic, whom I have cited, is blind. Milton was a great admirer of the beauties of nature, though he proclaims his ignorance of natural science, in a passage in the *Allegro*—

“ Or the twisted eglantine,”

where he undoubtedly confounds the sweet-briar with the woodbine. Still he was an admirer of nature, and in his *System of Education*, recommends, in the strongest terms, the study of natural philosophy, and natural history. Indeed I know nothing which tends more to expand the mind, and also to afford it rest and complacency in the vexatious turmoils of human life. All that proceeds from the hand of God is good; much that comes from the exertions of man partakes of that frailty and depravity of which he is the natural heir. But the great critic and moralist whom I have just quoted (Dr. Johnson), was somewhat limited in his views. His maxim was—

“ The proper study of mankind is man.”

He therefore could not relish many of the beauties of Milton, which depend upon allusions to the works of nature.

We then assign to Milton all the excellencies of a regular plot or fable. We allow that he is admirable in his delineation of character, except that he fails (as every human intellect must fail) in depicting the Supreme Majesty; but

we must allow that he has preserved the unity of action, and has finished his catastrophe with inimitable pathos and effect ; and we must also allow that the exuberance of his genius has protracted the action much longer than was consistent with the laws of epic poetry, or the reader's patience. Had the *Paradise Lost* been comprised in six books instead of twenty-four, no poem, antient or modern, could have been brought into competition with it.

If I thus presume to censure the plan and arrangement of this extraordinary poem, let me do it justice in a point of view where I cannot apprehend opposition. It is a *Thesaurus* of poetical beauties. The thoughts, the figures, the language, the verse, are unrivalled. Dryden and Gray, I might perhaps add Pope, have profited largely from the happy combinations, and the bold application of language to be found in this poem. Even Shakspeare himself seldom dared to deviate from the universal idiom ; but Milton taught us the full force of the English language ; he even enriched it. His poems would furnish a vocabulary copious enough for every purpose of rhetorical or poetical composition. His imagination was so ac-

tive, his knowledge was so unbounded, that every line is replete with curious information, with striking sentiment, or with poetical fancy. At the same time he draws a picture as no other man could have drawn it—Not to speak of his delineation of Satan, and the other characters in the infernal regions; not to instance the soft and tender description of the state of our first parents; can any thing equal the pathos and beauty of that passage which relates their expulsion from Paradise?

Whatever may be his faults, great is the praise of that man, to whom even the fastidiousness of criticism must assign the laurelled crown as the first lyric, and the first epic poet, of perhaps the most exalted nation in science and in literature on the face of the earth.

I cannot help observing, that the whole fabric of *Paradise Lost*, except the mere naked narrative of the Fall, is founded upon the most slender authority imaginable, two or three short, obscure, and ill-understood passages, chiefly in the Epistle of St. Jude; and yet it forms at present a part of our popular theology. Our grandsires, and even perhaps many grave Doctors of Divinity, would exclaim against the im-

piety of that man who would dare to question a syllable of the authenticity of all that he has related, of the war in heaven, of the state of the rebellious spirits, &c. &c. This is a new proof of the preponderancy of Milton's genius, as well as of his popularity.

LETTER XXXII.

On the Uses of Classical Learning.

MY DEAR JOHN,

I CANNOT better close a correspondence which has had so much reference to the classical writers, than by a short view of the uses and advantages of classical learning. The substance of what I shall advance on this subject was published some years ago in one of the volumes of the Memoirs of the Manchester Philosophical and Literary Society; but as that work is, I believe, out of print, and not likely to be reprinted, you will not be sorry to see what were then my sentiments on this important topic.

The study of ancient languages, the Greek and Latin at least, and of what are usually termed the classical authors in those languages, has, for some centuries, constituted a branch of liberal education, in every refined nation in this quarter of the globe. It appears, indeed, no more than a just tribute to the labours of

antiquity, that posterity should not ungratefully consign them to unmerited oblivion ; nor even content itself with contemplating that imperfect copy of their features, which a translation exhibits. It is a curiosity natural to the human mind, a becoming pride, to wish as intimate an acquaintance as possible with the illustrious dead ; to hold, in a manner, a friendly conversation with them, in their own language, and in their own peculiar style.

If these, however, were the only reasons for the cultivation of classical literature, though they might interest the philosopher, and the man of taste, still we could not in justice allow them that universal cogency, which is necessary to sanction a general practice. There must be other motives to warrant the hardship, which is imposed on almost every well-born youth, of consuming in severe study several of the most gay and delightful years of life, and of encountering hardships, which nothing but an object of some importance can justify.

Without wishing to appear a lover of paradox, I cannot dissemble that I do not in my own mind allow much force to the maxim which insists on the absolute necessity of classi-

cal learning in what are called the professions. I confess, I think it a most pernicious pedantry, which would involve in any kind of mystery those sciences which are most essential to human happiness. The Christian world has been no gainer either as to piety or morals by speculative divinity ; all that is necessary to mankind in theology ought to be, and I doubt not is, plain and easy to be comprehended by every capacity. What! shall none but Greek and Latin scholars be permitted to employ their reason on the most necessary topics? Admitting that there ought to be men in the Christian church who should be able to read the holy scriptures in their original languages, to correct mistranslations, to compare and collate manuscripts, and to detect errors of every kind ; must every plain country clergyman be an adept in languages, which cannot afford him the least assistance in instructing and informing the poor and illiterate flock, which is committed to his care?—He cannot preach in Latin ; the plainest and least pedantic style is that which will be most beneficial to his hearers ; nay, the formality of college manners, or the unyielding spirit of literary arrogance, are per-

haps qualities, more directly than others, calculated to obstruct or to frustrate his pious labours.

In medicine, I am sure, the use of a dead language has impeded rather than advanced science. Who will pretend to allege that the modern practitioner is obliged to have recourse to the antients for the principles of his art? The English language, if we include the translations from foreign authors, contains a body of medicine, ample and voluminous enough to engage the attention of most practitioners, and to furnish them with every useful kind of information. Would it not really be better for mankind, would it not prevent the most fatal mistakes, if prescriptions were written in our own language, instead of those uncouth characters, which frequently appear like hieroglyphics, and are too often absolutely so to those who are to prepare the medicine? In short, ought not a science which concerns the first of temporal possessions, to be laid as open as possible to the reason of mankind?—Ought it not to be industriously weeded of all technical jargon?—Ought not every thinking per-

son to be invited and encouraged to pay some attention to the progress of those diseases, which he may have an opportunity of observing, and to bring in with confidence, let them be right or wrong, his quota of discoveries to the common stock? I do not believe such a circumstance would be injurious to the health of the community, or discouraging to the regular practitioner.—It is only by knowing the outlines at least of medicine, and of the sciences subordinate to it, that any person can estimate truly the value of a physician, or see the necessity of long instruction and much practice, to accomplish a man in this important art. Is it not the ignorance of the public on these points, that gives countenance to quackery; and is it not, because the science is treated as a kind of mystery, that every antiquated female is possessed of some infallible nostrum? In other arts or professions, the knowledge of Latin is not insisted on as a necessary qualification, and yet no person, not regularly brought up to them, presumes to intrude himself into these professions. In a word, let no man practise physic who shall not be regularly educated or

instructed in it; but in the name of reason, what has the writing or speaking of Latin to do with the cure of diseases?

I grant that some useful treatises in medicine are occasionally published in Latin, but these are few, and the argument will equally apply to the necessity of accomplishing the young physician, in all the European languages. In a word, let it be remembered, that I am not pleading against the utility of the dead languages, but in favour of their *general* utility, against the vulgar notion that they are only necessary to certain professions.

Of all branches of knowledge, the *Law* ought to be the plainest, and most easily understood. Praying in an unknown tongue is not a greater solecism, than the involving in mystery and obscurity those rules which are to govern the conduct of every individual citizen. How can I be expected to conform to laws, with which I am to be unacquainted, or which I cannot understand?—What indeed are the evils to which the inhabitants of this country are not exposed, on account of the complex and intricate nature of our laws? I must observe (and I do it with no intentional disre-

spect to the honourable and upright part of the profession) that all who are unfortunate enough to hold their property by any disputable title, or who have rashly exposed themselves in any way to the mischiefs of legal chicanery, are made the prey of one class of citizens; and it is almost proverbial, that of all English commodities, Justice is by far the most expensive. If any part of what I have urged on this topic is consistent with fact, ought a classical education to be considered as a *necessary* qualification for understanding what all ought to understand?

It must be confessed, that with respect to the cultivation of the dead languages, society is at present in a very different state from what it was at the revival of Letters. At that period, all the science, all the history, all the taste which existed, were locked up in the volumes of the Antients; there was no access to any branch of knowledge but by this path; it was necessary to be introduced into this enlightened school, or to remain in barbarism and ignorance.

In the present state of literature it would be disingenuous to deny, that it is possible for a

person not classically educated, to make a proficiency in almost any department of science or literature.

In medicine and philosophy some persons might be named, of no inconsiderable eminence, with but a very slender portion of Greek or Latin. In law and politics also some instances might be adduced, was not a false pride unfortunately predominant, which might construe into an affront, what is really a compliment. The ladies may be cited with less ceremony on this occasion. In history and philosophy we have a Macaulay; in poetry a Seward and a Williams; in morals a Burney; in dramatic writing a Cowley and an Inchbald, all unacquainted with the languages and compositions of the ancients. It does not, however, follow, from these splendid examples, that the shortest and easiest way to knowledge and excellence, is through the medium of our mother tongue, and that a classical education is of no utility whatever. One lesson indeed we may deduce from what has been advanced on this topic, and that is, to look with a less fastidious eye upon those, who without these advantages (for advantages

they certainly are) have made good their progress to eminence and fame.

In estimating the uses of a classical education, it is necessary to confine our views entirely to the *present state* of literature, for indubitably a few centuries ago its advantages were infinitely greater, it was indeed not ornamental, but essential to science. Discarding, therefore, as much as possible, every prejudice of every kind, the real uses of a classical education appear to be nearly as follow.

I. In the first place, grammar, and perhaps orthography, are assisted, by an early acquaintance with the dead languages. I would not be understood to assert, that a person may not be practically versed in both these branches, without any such assistance, but it is a question, whether almost an equal portion of time is not consumed in the attainment of them, through the ordinary medium of English grammars, &c. Besides this, I am apprehensive that a complete, an enlarged, a scientific acquaintance with the principles of grammar, is hardly to be obtained, without the knowledge of some other language than our own. The

grammar of the Latin language is more regular than that of any other, and it is therefore admirably calculated to initiate young persons in that necessary science.

II. A similar advantage, which flows from a classical education, is a general knowledge of the structure of language. The Greek, so copious, so curiously compounded, so admirably adapted to supply every want of the mind with respect to expression, affords the happiest instance of art and human invention in the construction of language ; it is impossible to study it without perceiving our ideas enlarged and improved on this curious subject. Such an acquaintance with the antient forms of language, enables us to improve our own, to extend and diversify our modes of expression, to add new and proper words, if necessary ; and gives us confidence in occasionally introducing new expressions, and deviating from the common and colloquial forms.

III. A third use, which is not less obvious, results from an accurate acquaintance with the etymology of words. To the phrases of common life, custom has sufficiently familiarized

us, and these indeed are most of them derived from our northern ancestors. But the language of science, the language of books indeed, in general, is of classical origin; and it is impossible to know the full force, the correct application of words, without, in some degree, being acquainted with their source.

Every man who has composed for the public, must be sensible of this observation; and allowing every thing to genius and industry, still it cannot be denied that accuracy in writing, at least, is almost exclusively the characteristic of those who can boast some acquaintance with the languages of antiquity.

IV. It is some commendation of almost any pursuit, to say, that it affords us an elegant and an innocent amusement. That it engages occasionally the mind, which, perhaps, would otherwise be the prey of spleen; that it fills up agreeably those hours which, if left vacant, might perhaps be contaminated with vice:

“ _____ Nō

“ Posces antē diem librum cum lumine; si non,

“ Intendes animum studiis & Rebus honestis,

“ Invidia vel amore vigil torquere.”

HOR., Lib. I. Ep. 2.

" Unless you light your early lamp to find
" A moral book ; unless you form your mind.
" To nobler studies you shall forfeit rest,
" And love or envy shall distract your breast."

FRANCIS.

It is true there are a number of excellent authors in our own language, but still the perusal of the classics, in their original dress, varies and extends this species of entertainment.

V. It is pleasant to observe the manner of an original author, and instructive to remark the peculiar style in which men of exalted genius have, at such distant periods, expressed themselves. I may add, that from the perusal of an original author, we seem to form a more perfect picture of the manners and characters of the age which he describes, than can be acquired from a translation ?

VI. Whoever expects to find in the antients the perfection of science, will be disappointed ; but this will not warrant us in a total rejection of all the assistance which may be derived from this source. Of natural knowledge, in particular, there is certainly but little to be collected from their writings. Aristotle, in his history of animals, is a laborious and tolerably

correct reporter of facts ; but how small a branch of natural science is this, and how much better detailed by modern writers ? Pliny, except where he has copied Aristotle, is a wretched fabulist, and no reasoner at all.

The metaphysics of Plato are subtile, visionary, and useless ; those of Aristotle are mere scholastic definitions. In the republic of the latter, as well as in some of the writings of Xenophon and Cicero, are some good political observations ; but the experience of the moderns has enabled them greatly to improve this important science.

But if the ancients were deficient on these topics, they were not so in what may be considered as the basis of useful knowledge, in morals, and an acquaintance with the human heart. Though I confess I do not find much of ethical science in Plato, which is deserving of attention ; yet in the *Απολλωγία* of Socrates, and some other of the dialogues, there occur some beautiful reflections. The morals of Aristotle are a dull common-place book, chiefly consisting, like the rest of his philosophy, in definitions. In the writings of the stoics, however, some admirable precepts are to be found ;

indeed we may go further, we may venture to say there is something of principle in the doctrines of these philosophers ; they mould ethics into a kind of science, and distinguish with accuracy the different stages of human perfection.

*Απαιδεύῃ εἶργον, τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐγκαλεῖν, ἐφ' οἷς
αὐτῷ πρᾶσσει κακῶς. ἡγεμένη παιδεύεσθαι,
τοῖς αὐτῷ. πεπαιδευμένη, τοῖς μητ' ἄλλῳ,
μηθ' αὐτῷ.*

ΕΠΙΚΤ. ΕΝΧΙΡΙΔ. C. 10.

“ It is the act of an uneducated and ignorant person to blame others for the evils he has brought on himself; of one beginning to be wise to blame himself; of the really wise to blame neither the one nor the other.”

*Ἰδιῶν ἡσυχίαι καὶ χαράκηται· ὁ δὲ ποιεῖ ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ προσδοκᾷ ὠφελείαν
ἢ βλάβην, ἀλλ' ἀπο τῶν ἑξω. φιλοσοφῶν ἡσυχίαι καὶ χαράκηται· πᾶσαν
ὠφελείαν καὶ βλάβην, ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ προσδοκᾷ.*

Π. C. 71.

“ It is the state and character of a vulgar mind, never to look for profit or injury from himself, but from some external cause. It is the character of a philosopher to look on himself for whatever may be profitable or injurious.”

Without the rage for definition so obvious in Aristotle, their distinctions were happier, more accurate and more agreeable to nature.

Ουτοι δε οἱ λόγοι συνακλῖοι. ἐγὼ σὺ πλούσιώτερος εἰμι, ἐγὼ σὺ ἀρα κρείσσων. ἐγὼ σὺ λογιώτερος, ἐγὼ σὺ ἀρα κρείσσων. ἐκείνοι δὲ μάλλον συνακλῖοι· ἐγὼ σὺ πλουσιώτερος εἰμι, ἢ ἐμὴ ἀρα κλῖσις τῆς σῆς κρείσσων. ἐγὼ λογιώτερος, ἢ ἐμὴ ἀρα λέξις τῆς σῆς κρείσσων. σὺ δὲ γε ὡς κλῖσις εἰ, ὡς λέξις.

·EPICT. ENCHIR. c. 66.

These expressions are not just—"I am richer than thou, therefore I am better. I am more eloquent, and therefore better." It would be more correct to say I am richer than thou, therefore my property is better. I am more eloquent, therefore my language is better. For thou thyself art neither money nor language.

I shall select a few specimens from another of the same school, and characterised by the same peculiarity of expression.

Θάνατος δὲ γε καὶ ζωὴ, δόξα καὶ ἀδοξία, πόνος καὶ ἡδονή, πλοῦς καὶ πενία. πάντα ἐπίσης συμβαίνει ἀνθρώπων τοῖς ἢ ἀγαθοῖς καὶ τοῖς κακοῖς, ὥς καλὰ ὄντα, ὥς αἰσχροῖς.

·ANTON. lib. ii. c. 11.

"Death and life, honour and dishonour, pain and pleasure, riches and poverty, these alike happen to the good and the bad, and the rea-

son is, that they are in themselves neither good nor di. honourable.”

Τὸ ἀνθρώπινον βίη ὁ μὲν χρόνον, στιγμήν ἢ δε ὥσια βίησα ἢ δε αἰσθησεις, ἀμιγρὰ. ἢ δε ὅλη τὴ σωματικῇ συγκρίσεις, εὐσηπίος· ἢ δε ψυχὴ βόμβος· ἢ δε τυχη, δυσέκμαρτον· ἢ δε φημηἀκρίον, Συνελοντι δε εἰπειν, παντὰ τὰ μὲν τῷ σωματικῷ, ποταμῷ· τὰ δε τῆς ψυχῆς, ὄνειρος καὶ τυφός. ὁ δε βίος, πολεμῷ καὶ ξενίᾳ ἐπιδημία· ἢ ὑπεροφημία δε, ληθη. τι ὅν το παραπεμψι δυναμενον, ἐν καὶ μονον, φιλοσοφία. τῷ δε, ἐν τῷ τηρεῖν τον ἐνδον δαιμονα ἀνυβριζον, καὶ ἀσινη, ἡδονῶν καὶ πονῶν κρείσσονα, μηδὲν εἰκη ποιητῆ, μηδε διεψευσμενως καὶ μεθ' ὑποκρισεως, ἀνευδεν τῷ ἄλλον ποιησαι τι, ἢ μὴ ποιησαι.

ANTON. lib. ii. c. 17.

“The extent of human life is but a point; existence is constantly flowing away; perception dark and obscure; the body delicate and allied to corruption; the soul a vapour; fortune difficult to foretel; fame injudiciously distributed. In a word, what belongs to the body flows away like a river; what belongs to the soul is a dream or a bubble. Life is a warfare or a pilgrimage; and posthumous fame is, with respect to ourselves, oblivion. What then is permanent and satisfactory? Philosophy alone; and this consists in keeping the soul free from injury and disgrace, superior to pleasure and pain, without dissembling, falsehood or hypo-

crisy, and as to happiness independent of the motions of another”.

ὥδαμυ γὰρ ὅτι ἡσυχιώτερον, ὅτι ἀπραγμονετέρον ἄνθρωπος ἀναχωρεῖ, ἢ εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ψυχὴν· μαγισθ’ ὅστις ἔχει ἐνδον τοιαυτὰ, εἰς ἃ ἐγκυψας ἐν πάσῃ ἐνμαρεια εὐθὺς γινεῖται.

ANTON. lib. iv. c. 3.

“A man cannot retire into any place more quiet, or less disturbed, than into the recesses of his own soul, especially if he has treasured up such things there as he can contemplate with satisfaction.”

Nor is there wanting a higher philosophy for a basis to these reflexions: speaking of death—

Τὸ δὲ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀπελθεῖν, εἰ μὲν θεοὶ εἰσιν, ἄδεν δεινόν· κακῶ γὰρ σε ἢ καὶ ἂν περὶ βάλωεν· ἢ δὲ εἰ τι ἢ καὶ εἰσιν, ἢ ὃ μέλει ἀνθρώποις τῶν ἀνθρωπείων, τί μοι ζῆν ἐν κόσμῳ κενῷ θείων, ἢ προνοίας κενῆ; ἄλλα καὶ εἰσι, καὶ μέλει ἀνθρώποις τῶν ἀνθρωπείων.

IB. lib. ii. c. 11.

“To depart from earthly things is no calamity. If there are gods they will suffer no evil to befall thee; if there are none, or if they totally disregard human affairs, what advantage is it to live in a world without gods, or

without a Providence. But that there are superior beings, and that they regard human events, is beyond dispute."

Τὰ τῶν Θεῶν προνοίας μέσα. τὰ τῆς τύχης ἔκ ἀνευ φύσεως, ἢ συ-
κλωσεως, καὶ ἐπιπλοκῆς τῶν προνοίᾳ διοικουμένων.

ANTON. lib. ii. c. 3.

"All is full of the Divine Providence. What is called fortune or chance is not without nature at the bottom, and that connexion and chain of causes which is ordered by Providence."

It must, however, be confessed of the Stoic morality, that much of it is extravagant, and some of it trifling; that it is founded upon too few principles, abounds with repetition, and, perhaps, justly incurs the censure of (I think) Lactantius; that it was calculated for actors on a theatre, and not for men in the world.

The most regular and methodical tract upon ethics, which is contained in the whole scope of classical literature, is the offices of Tully; this valuable fragment contains much excellent reasoning, and much sound observation; but, still it appears to me but a fragment. Whether

the lively and desultory genius of Cicero revolted against the toil of a laboured, methodical, scientific production, or whether he was interrupted in the progress of his task, the work is certainly imperfect; there are several useful topics entirely omitted, and even the system itself is left in an unfinished state.

In the other beautiful rhapsodies of Tully, in vain shall we look for any thing like system or method. No man, however, can read his *Cato Major*, his *De Amicitia*, his *Tusculan Disputations*, without moral improvement; his *Letters*, and all his writings, abound in animating and interesting reflexions, in excellent maxims. There is a point, a force, a climax, too, in his observations, which cannot be too greatly admired, and carries the mind along with it, and which gives a novelty even to what is common-place in itself:

“*Et nomen pacis dulce est, & ipsa res salutaris; sed inter pacem & servitutem plurimum interest: Pax est tranquilla libertas, servitus postremum malorum omnium, non modò bello, sed morte etiam repellendum.*”—Cic. in *M. Ant.*

“The very name of peace is delightful, and

the possession most salutary ; but there is a wide difference between peace and slavery. Peace is the tranquil enjoyment of liberty ; slavery is the extreme of evils, not only to be repelled by war, but even by death."

"Sin aliquando necessitas nos ad ea detruserit, quæ nostri ingenii non erunt : omnis adhibenda erit cura, meditatio, diligentia, ut ea si non decorè at quam minimum indecorè facere possimus."—CIC. de Off.

"If sometimes necessity should compel us to what is contrary to our minds, we must exert our utmost care, attention and diligence, that if we cannot do them decorously, we shall at all events do them as little indecorously as possible."

In the writings of the poets, the most useful and beautiful reflexions are expressed with a simplicity which delights, or a force which penetrates the heart ; the former is chiefly the characteristic of the Greek, the latter of the Roman muse.

If HISTORY is classed among the sciences, in this the antients cannot be too warmly commended. To their admirable writings we are indebted, not only for the most important facts

in the history of mankind, but for the most perfect models in that species of composition. The antients have indeed scarcely been equalled in this line, and I think I can venture to say, that I have not seen the sweet simplicity of Herodotus—the dignity of Thucydides, the harmony and elegance of Sallust, or the pointed and forcible expression of Tacitus, transferred into any modern language, by their most learned translators.

VII. But whatever was wanting to the antients in science, is amply compensated in taste. Homer and Virgil are still unrivalled, and the latter of them is certainly still untranslated. The pastorals of Theocritus, and perhaps the odes of Pindar, have nothing exactly resembling them in modern languages. The satires of Horace and Juvenal have only been imitated. In every department of prose composition also, we find among the antients excellent models. Without deprecating the merit of our contemporaries, we may truly say that the clear and energetic reasoning of Demosthenes, the full, harmonious, and ornamental periods of Cicero, and the sententious neatness of Sallust, have not been excelled. To form, therefore,

a correct taste, one effectual mode, at least, is by a well directed study of these estimable compositions, and by occasionally comparing them with the excellencies and defects of modern productions.

If in any department of polite literature, which they have cultivated, the antients have particularly failed, it is in the drama ; but of this I have said sufficient in the preceding letters.

There are some other branches of literature, in which I think the moderns have excelled, and some which have not at all been cultivated by the antients ; but this does not, in any view, militate against the utility of classical literature, since an accomplished person ought to be acquainted with the most perfect productions, both of antient and modern times.

From a fair consideration of the real uses of classical literature, some practical conclusions result, which appear of no inconsiderable importance in the education of youth.

Impressed as I am with a full sense of the advantages resulting from a classical education, I cannot help thinking, that an unreasonable and enthusiastic regard has sometimes been

paid to the writings of the antients. Instead of considering them as useful assistants, as guides to knowledge, they have been extolled, as containing within themselves all that is worthy of being known, and men have mistaken the rudiments of science, for science itself. How many have devoted their lives to the study of the classics, as if there were no other duties to be performed, no other advantages to be obtained, no other laurels to be reaped? How many have continued, during their existence, in the elements of science, without extending their views to any thing beyond them, without indeed making use of their own understanding.

I should wish to see the antients studied for their matter, as well as for their language; but the information which they convey, is too commonly made a secondary consideration. The attention of youth is directed to the elegant latinity of Cæsar and of Horace, not to the facts, observations, or precepts, which are contained in these valuable authors. If the tutors of our youth condescend to remark even upon the beauties of the classics, it is not on the beauty of sentiment, it is not on the vigour of imagination, it is not on the poetical ornaments.

Their attention is at the utmost extended to a choice of words, to a curious grammatical connexion, or to the nice intricacies of idiomatical phrasology.

At the revival of letters a race of commentators were useful, if not necessary ; they were the pioneers of literature, who cleared the way for more respectable adventurers. But in the present state of literature, can we behold without regret a man of genius dedicating a life to a few barren and fruitless verbal criticisms, to the regulating of a few phrases, or correcting in a few instances the quantity and metre of an obscure author ; when, had he applied his talents as they ought to have been applied, he, perhaps, would have produced an original composition, more valuable than the production on which he has so unworthily bestowed his labour ?

To write Latin decently and intelligibly, may occasionally prove a convenience to a literary man ; chiefly in facilitating his commerce with foreign literati ; but surely the attempt (for it is but an attempt) to compose poetical productions in Greek and Latin, is, at best, only a species of elegant trifling. If life is short, and

science of unbounded extent; if our duties are many, and but few our opportunities of qualifying for them, and performing them as we ought, are we justified in neglecting solid and useful branches of knowledge; are we to pursue straws, and leaves, and gossamer, while we leave the grain and fruits, which should be the support of life, to perish and to rot?

The example of some of our enlightened neighbours on the continent, may, perhaps, be worthy of our imitation. They study the antients, but they study them to read and imitate them. They are not devoted to this study alone; they make themselves masters not only of the antient, but of the modern languages; they can converse with the well-informed of other nations, and they can read their works. Thus an infinite extent of knowledge is opened to their view; and they are less likely to be the slaves of prejudice than the cloistered pedant, who expects to find the whole of knowledge in the blind reveries of antient scholiasts; whose philosophy is locked up in Plato, whose morals and politics are only derived from Aristotle, and who regards the tales of Pliny as the perfection of natural science.

It is by estimating truly the advantages of classical learning, and not by over-rating its importance, that we can give it respect, or promote its cultivation.

I think an acquaintance with the antient languages, essential to the formation of an accomplished character; but if a man would be accomplished he must not stop there; he must not expect to find in the antients what they do not contain; or “see in Homer more than Homer knew.”

In a word, without neglecting the antients, we may derive much wisdom, much taste, and much pleasure from the productions of modern writers; the study of both is compatible, if we study both as we ought.

THE END.

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